

OUTSIDE THE ARK

BY THE SAME AUTHOR
THE VALLEY OF REGRET

OUTSIDE :: ::
:: :: THE ARK
:: BY ADELAIDE HOLT ::



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PART I—HUGH

CHAPTER I

"YOU know, Inskip," said the editor of the *Critic* with a somewhat wry smile, "whenever I want, for party purposes, an absolutely brilliant exposition of dismal wisdom, I send for you—and you never fail me."

"I am terribly wise for my years," the man addressed as Inskip replied. "And preciously dismal," he added.

The editor—whose name was Le Measurier—looked at him kindly.

"You have been overworking," he said, "and this excess of precocity is the result. Your leaders have always erred a little on the Socratic side, but this one"—he put out his hand for a proof-slip on the table beside him—"might have been signed 'Solomon.'"

Inskip laughed suddenly, and his face, which was remarkably passive for a man of his age—he was then thirty-two—lit up with a spasm of grim merriment.

Le Measurier, whose wits, too, were alert, perceived the humour of his last remark.

"Solomon before the Fall," he added, "doubtless a profound and solemn young man." He glanced keenly at his friend. "Personally, I should be more enthusiastic over Solomon after his first marriage."

His companion making no reply either to words or glance, Le Measurier proceeded with some diffidence :

"You know, Inskip, you will never be able to write really ironically profound leaders for my paper until you are married."

"Why do you say that?"

"You lack that touch of shrewdness which is the invariable asset of the happily-married man."

"And what," asked Inskip, "are the assets of the writer who is married unhappily?"

"An amazing, an appalling, brilliancy," Le Measurier said, as he puffed at his pipe. He put out a big brown hand, and patted his friend's shoulder. "Jesting apart," he added, "what you need are: *a*, less idealism; *b*, more human sympathy. The quickest route to obtain both is by marriage."

"Yes," said Inskip, "that is all very well for men such as you, who are a model of sanity and all the domestic virtues, but when I marry——" he stumbled over the words, and if he had been a woman—and unsophisticated—would doubtless have blushed—"if I marry," he continued, "idealism will have an enormous amount to do with it."

His friend, who, in spite of his name, was Scotch, and had red curly hair and a merry mouth, grinned to himself.

"Take my advice, my son," said he, "and do not idealise the girl you are going to marry."

"I am not going to marry," said Inskip, with lazy warmth, and he crossed over to the door and unhooked his overcoat, "even in order to write shrewd or appallingly brilliant leaders for the *Critic*, he added.

He spoke with firmness, and, with a somewhat irritable gesture, waved the subject aside.

The young Scotchman was, however, in a teasing mood, and heeded neither Inskip's gesture nor the tone of his voice.

"You are young. You are incurably romantic. And your looks are an alluring admixture of calculation and wickedness."

"You mean I look like a devil with a turn for mathematics—a sort of Satanic Senior Wrangler?"

"I mean," said Le Measurier, "that you would have no difficulty whatsoever in securing the affection of any right-thinking maiden. You need only stand at your full height, look pathetically weary as you are doing at the present moment, talk for a few seconds with great refinement on the passion of love—and she is at your feet."

"Yes," said Inskip, gloomily, "and once there she would come to her senses. Who would marry a man with boots like these?"

And he looked down with profound distaste at the strongly soled product of a Strand bootmaker. He was wriggling into his overcoat as he spoke. It had been born, one of a vast family, in a City warehouse, and its owner had first met it in a large Emporium in New Oxford Street.

"And to think," said Le Measurier, with a touch of savagery, "that, if you'd only act like a sane person, you might be raking in fifteen hundred a year."

"I am not going to sell my soul to the yellow press for fifteen million," said Inskip.

The Scotchman looked at him pityingly.

"Man, they don't want your soul—they want your brains," he said.

"I know no difference between them," said Inskip.

Le Measurier slipped into his overcoat—the sleeves were satin-lined—and they both went down the office stairs together into the warm London night. They walked instinctively away from Fleet Street and, turning down a dark lane, found themselves on the Embankment. The two men stood leaning over the parapet, watching the sleek, oily waters. Le Measurier took off his hat, and ran his fingers through his curly hair. It stood up in a riot of red disorder, and created a splash of fantastic colour in the grey and gloomy evening. He looked at his friend with kindly blue eyes. Hugh Inskip's whole attitude, his face, his long white hands, his square and obstinate shoulders, conveyed the impression at that moment of so violent and profound a distaste for life, that Le Measurier, who was happily married, had a charming, cheeky baby, an annual income of over two thousand, and never an ailment more serious than a cold in his head, felt a spasm of anxious sympathy for his eccentric young friend.

"If you took over this editorship of the *Comet* that Steinway offers you, you'd have nothing on earth more harrowing to do than turning out nippy articles that would just steer clear of libel, writing enthusiastic reviews of those books whose publishers advertise extravagantly in your columns, and booming all those charming and delightful little peacocks who pirouette nightly at Steinway's pet theatre. Why, man alive,

it's great! You would have fifteen hundred a year, cast away that terrible profundity that is creeping upon you unawares, buy your coats in Savile Row, and for ever lose the chance of developing into that well-known product of the journalistic farmyard who calls himself a free lance, while his friends call him a failure."

Le Measurier, who was intensely and almost passionately practical, spoke with some warmth, and for one moment a dull flush swept over his companion's colourless face. He swung round abruptly, and struck the Embankment parapet with his stick.

"I'd rather die in the gutter than take over a Steinway-combination paper," he said.

"That," replied Le Measurier, "is exactly the romantic, St. Martin-cum-Assisi style of thing you young fellows are always ready to do. But in your case, as in most of these Ruskin-bred supermen, it's not an alternative of dying in the gutter or dining at the Ritz. If it were, I, as a successful editor"—he suddenly remembered the violent disarray of his hair, and replaced his hat—"would at once see the picturesque possibility, the 'good story.' You, for instance, Inskip, pale, dark, and what a woman calls 'interesting-looking,' lying down at the side of the Embankment, your profile very much in evidence, dying deliciously that your soul may not be tainted by the foul finger of a commercially-run newspaper. Why, half Fleet Street would see the spectacular advantages of the position. There would be more idealists to die than gutters for them to die in. Unfortunately, the alternative in your case isn't death,

it's just nonentity—a daily, dismal striving. Your articles are remarkably good, everyone says they are, but they're not popular. You haven't the sense to see that you must get notoriety before you can be a prophet. Go out and dance perpetually in the limelight an indecorous can-can, if you want people to appreciate the spirituality of the article you are yearning to write for a great quarterly review. *That's journalism.*"

Inskip, who was smoking furiously, made no reply.

"And here," continued Le Measurier, "is your very opportunity. Why Steinway asked such a young Quixote, God in Heaven alone knows!" (In attributing this information exclusively to his Creator, Mr. Le Measurier did himself less than justice, for it was as the result of his warmest eulogies and earnest appeal that Steinway, a somewhat unpleasing Jewish millionaire, had offered the post of editor on his new evening paper to Hugh Inskip.) "Why don't you accept and be thankful? Get rid of all these absurd ideals of yours: ideals play the very deuce with a business man. I'd rather put my money in rubber, any day, or play systems with it at Monico, than trust it to a fellow with ideals."

Hugh Inskip, who was a remarkably silent man, was watching a barge floating down the river, and seemed to be listening with a sort of dreamy content to the outburst of his warm-hearted friend. When Le Measurier finally ended, very hot and breathless, Inskip turned and looked down on him—he was nearly a head taller—with lazy interest.

"My reason for declining that post," he said, "has nothing to do with idealism."

"Isn't fifteen hundred a year enough for you, then? If you run up the circulation, Steinway would probably raise your screw to two thousand. You must start a woman's page, you know, and have all those jolly little wrinkles put in on '*How to make black boots brown.*' I know a man who does these things awfully well, with just that touch of unusualness that is so effective. Don't have a woman, Inskip, or you'll find your page will be exactly like every other 'woman's page' in London. Women are such damned sheep. Bless 'em."

Hugh Inskip stopped the conversation of his too-elloquent friend by the simple plan of pulling Le Measurier's hat down over his mouth. When the Scotchman had recovered from his surprise—for Inskip was the least frolicsome of persons—it was too late to continue his good advice. Inskip was speaking himself.

"I could never harness myself between the shafts of a daily paper. The restraint of it would make any creative work an impossibility."

"Nobody *wants* creative work on a newspaper. Good Lord!" Le Measurier was genuinely shocked at the idea. "I tell you this, Inskip, you'll have jolly well to uphold the Government through thick and thin on the *Comet*, and not try on any of your mad hatter ideas. The policy of a paper *must* be upheld."

He looked a little uneasily at the younger man, but it was growing misty on the Embankment, and he could not read his face.

Hugh Inskip pulled out his watch. It was seven o'clock.

"If I'm to be in at 'Anna Povolski' to-night, I must dine and change," he said. "Come on, you'll have to be there, too, I suppose."

Le Measurier immediately glanced at his watch in some surprise, saw it was much later than he had thought, and the two men hastened towards the Strand once more.

CHAPTER II

THE thin fog of seven o'clock had become a thick drizzle an hour later, as Inskip, whose somewhat precarious income did not admit of many taxis, and whose rather fastidious taste could not endure the humbler motor-bus, turned out of the narrow passage of Clifford's Inn, where he had a flat, and walked towards the Piccadilly Theatre, which was to see the first-night of the most important play of the year.

The rain-sleek streets reflected a thousand facets of light from the jewelled gas advertisements; Inskip, who loved the bright loneliness of crowds, walked slowly towards his destination, heeding neither the salutations of various pressmen of his acquaintance, who were hurrying towards Fleet Street and their night work, nor the softly insistent wind which was driving with a warm wetness against his face.

He was, that night, intensely, almost violently happy. Whether it were the conversation with Le Measurier on the Embankment earlier in the evening—a conversation which had heated all his native obstinacy to boiling point; or whether it were the thin, impalpable fog that so surely was veiling all the ugliness of the London night, leaving uncovered only the suggestion of a gay adventure; or whether it were merely that a first-night at the "Piccadilly"

still held a thrill for a man who had kept fairly unspoiled a divinely childlike capacity for pleasure, he could hardly have told himself.

He had had four years of the inner life of a great morning paper, years on which he looked back with a certain sick horror. At the time they had alternated, fairly evenly, between boyish optimism and hopeless depression; but Hugh, in his after-life, when his utter inability to run in the harness of a workaday world had become more pronounced, remembered only the latter.

The dreary mornings when he could not sleep because he was too tired with the intolerable strain of the overnight's work. The sunny afternoons when he longed to be out of doors, and had to sit instead for interminable hours in St. Stephen's, his brains for ever on the alert for any external inspiration for the bright and breezy sketch which must appear in the morrow's paper—the only bricks for the building of which being speeches with neither punctuation, grammar, nor ideas to justify them.

Once, in a burst of youthful frivolity, he sent up to the compositors' room five lines instead of his usual column.

"The member for South-West Pontefract talked incessantly for an hour, but said nothing. Meanwhile, the entire community quietly slept, with the exception of the Home Secretary, who is noted in the House for his noisy slumbers."

This effusion was, by an absolute miracle, saved from appearing in and disgracing the paper of which this irresponsible young man was a member. As it

was he was severely reprimanded, and was in future required to report the House of Commons' speeches verbatim, afterwards correcting the grammar of the more eloquent members, and adding flashes of brilliancy to the less. At this latter game he became an adept, and gentlemen of the Cabinet in time grew to have a positive affection for the *Critic*—"that fairest, most reliable, most literary of the Imperialistic organs."

But, if Inskip were tempted to be too piquant on occasions, there were occasions when he certainly was not piquant enough.

He had been on his paper for nearly three months before the staff of the *Critic* began to notice that, when any particularly interesting divorce case was being tried, their paper, usually so noticeable for its bright and entertaining manner of treating disastrous marriages, and for the high morality of its leading articles, was absolutely restrained. It was nobody's business but that of Inskip, who edited the Law Court news, but word passed from mouth to mouth, and Hugh was the unconscious object of much merriment among the junior staff who would have liked to have called him "Sir Galahad," only nobody looked less like a saint, and more like a surly but highly-cultured devil, than their black-browed, black-bearded comrade.

One day Le Measurier burst into the subs' room, a long proof-slip in his hand, his curly red hair bristling with rage.

"What damned fool is responsible for this?" he roared.

Fifteen more or less innocent faces were turned towards him awaiting an explanation.

"Who's been subbing the Macgregor divorce-suit?" cried Le Measurier breathlessly, looking, with his diminutive height, his red curls, and his jolly Scotch face, very like an angry boy.

"I believe I did," drawled a lazy voice from a far-away desk, and Inskip's dark head emerged from behind a newspaper.

Le Measurier waved the others aside, and strode to the end of the room.

"Then what in hell's name do you mean by leaving out the *chef-d'œuvre*?"

"*Chef-d'œuvre*?" Inskip echoed, with a rather black frown.

"The letters—Enid Macgregor's letters to her husband. Don't you know they were the best thing of their kind we've had for years? Every paper in Great Britain has the headlines in leaded type, and look at us——" he waved the proof. "The first edition is out, and we'll have to strain every nerve to get 'em in the second." He calmed down for a minute. "Inskip," he added, in a lower voice, "you can't play pranks with a paper like this. That affair over Parliament may have been excusable—one cannot be expected to be serious over the affairs of the nation. But when it comes to a divorce-case—why, no paper in England can afford to play the fool with it. Haven't we been praying for a big do? And haven't we had our prayer answered?"

Inskip had been working in his shirt sleeves, and he now stood up, his gigantic height towering above

his chief's sturdy little body. His usually colourless face had an almost death-like pallor, the dark, enigmatic eyes stood out in startling contrast.

"It makes me savage," he began, in a voice the very quietness of which added to its intensity, "savage to think such letters should be published. It's brutal and inhuman enough that they should be read in court. But to be blazoned in a newspaper, to be read at breakfast tables all over the country as a condiment to the Englishwoman's eggs and bacon . . . it's sickening."

There was a minute's silence in the big room, then a murmur of voices—all amused.

"Good for you, Inskip."

"Rise, Sir Righteous-Indignation-Inskip."

"I shall allow my little sister to read these cases soon."

"Inskip, you're a fool—the limit."

Then something on the face of the recipient of their banter seemed to strike the noisy crew. There was a lull: and then the voice of the junior reporter—a very bright member of the staff.

"Why—why—the man actually believes in those letters!"

And then there was a room-shaking laugh, in which even the angry Le Measurier joined, while Inskip, with an expressionless face, was fastening his waistcoat.

The editor, who was a kind-hearted man, put out his big hand and smote him on the shoulder.

"My dear fellow," he said, "in theory your opinions do you credit, but in practice you punish the very people you wish to serve. These beautiful epistles

were never meant, I assure you, to blush unread. Remember I've been at this dirty business longer than you, and I say in all seriousness that the *bonâ fide* of most divorce court letters is more than doubtful."

And then he was sorry he had spoken. Inskip's face never altered, he put on his coat and left the room, but, speaking of the matter afterwards to his wife, Le Measurier said :

"I never felt such a brute in my life. It was like striking a child. In fact, it was striking the child in a man. Inskip's no Puritan; he's done things, like most of us, that would make your hair stand on end, if you knew; but, through it all, he's got this d——d idealism. He really thought what he said was true."

And that little incident was the beginning of a firm friendship between two very dissimilar men, which lasted all Le Measurier's lifetime. But in the office, Hugh Inskip, as was to be expected, for some time was called "Enid"—rather inaudibly, for his temper was known to be uncertain; and Mrs. Macgregor's letter was framed, hung over the mantelpiece, and labelled "Index Expurgatorius."

Inskip, however, had that valuable quality—a temper superior to disillusionment, and, thus roughly brought to his senses, would, thereafter, edit the most bloodthirsty murders and the most appalling suicides with the least possible expenditure of blue pencil. Also he grew, like all worthy pressmen, to have a horror of nothing but a world which should take a craze for doing exactly what it ought to do.

Except Le Measurier, he had very few friends, but the fiery little Scotchman conceived a great liking for

him, and seeing, what all clever journalists would see, that Hugh Inskip was absolutely thrown away on office work, set him to write the shortest of the three daily leaders; then, finding these to be models of profundity, gave him column articles to write every day in different styles and with dissimilar signatures to deceive the guileless public, on such diverse subjects as "Are Women Secret Eaters?" "My First Golf Lesson," and "How to Bring up a Baby."

Mr. Inskip developed an extraordinary aptitude for writing these little articles with a strange effectiveness, and gained for his paper a reputation for versatility which it has never since lost.

But at the end of his fourth year at this work Inskip had grown to loathe it only less than himself. The intolerable lack of imagination; the appalling narrowness of outlook; the fetters that closed in upon him at every turn, even while they called themselves Liberty; the knowledge that had become his through painful years of desperate striving—the knowledge that he must never write *A* because churchmen would be annoyed—and they were more easily annoyed than anybody in the world; that he must not write *B* or the Government would never give Le Measurier the peerage, which was the apex of the little man's desire; that he must always be merry and bright, for pessimism was out of fashion since the new Bishop of London ascended the throne and all was well with the world; that every controversial subject, such as Suffrage, the Welsh Church, the Problem of London Night-life, must be discussed with dignified restraint until the *vox populi* was very audible, when the

Critic must immediately raise its lion's head and lead the roar. He had learnt, too, with the same sick loathing, that the best thing in the world to happen, from the point of view of the pressman, was a gigantic but not too lengthy war; but that smaller blessings, were shipwrecks, Ministers of State who led double lives (with indiscretion), murders in the underworld, *causes célèbres*, even such trifling adventures as a play which might bring a blush to the cheek of any innocent reader of the *Critic* who should go to see it (unaware, of course, of what he was to see), or a book which for the same reason might have a column of dignified reproof and horror to itself—or even a leading article on its undesirability (but this latter was a rare event, and usually coincided with a full-page advertisement on the front sheet by its publisher).

All these and many more such things Inskip learned to take as "good copy," and to elaborate as a good journalist should, while at his heart was always a gnawing pain—that slow, miserable pain that daunts and mocks the courage, that showed him, day by day, whither the life he had entered upon with such high idealism was leading him.

Yet all the while, with a sort of desperate loyalty to an ignoble thing, he dwelt on the enormous power for good placed in the hands of a great paper. The *Critic* raised sums of money for charities raised by none other in the land. It was invariably on "the side of the angels"—those colloquial, cheery, right-thinking members of an unseen world, with whose prejudices and predilections the present century is, apparently, so well-acquainted. Its tone and temper

in the difficult matter of Germany were diplomacy itself: it said a good deal more than "The Times," and a great deal less than its own rival paper on the other side—a policy which, while it provided much interesting reading for those few who cared for foreign affairs of the future, yet saved its prestige, and the writing of many of those leading articles (so well-known in Fleet Street) explaining that we had not meant in our leader on this subject a week ago exactly what the public seem, unfortunately for themselves, to have inferred.

Inskip, whose family was all in diplomacy, save his father, who was a retired colonel and King's Messenger, dwelt with pleasure on the policy of his paper in foreign affairs at those moments when grim depression was gnawing at his vitals.

In his free moments, and they were not many, for he was a conscientious journalist, he wrote to please himself—that delicious, delirious ecstasy which, as every writer knows so well (or *should* know) does not necessarily mean pleasing either his publisher or his public (if he can get either of these essential sides of his triangle).

Again what Le Measurier called his "damned idealism" clipped his wings, or who knows whither he might not have flown? He had that priceless gift in his profession—an imagination which never played him false, but he kept it in check with such vehement chastity, employed the bearing-rein with so intolerable rigour, was so stern and remorseless a critic of his own flights into poesy, that no magazines would accept his articles save those quarterlies which lie luxuriously

on the club tables of the rich, their beautiful thick white leaves containing, as a rule, so much profundity, and so little piquancy, that their edges never become ragged with the paper-knife between the times of their appearance on and removal from the polished oak.

Inskip grew a little weary of having his efforts bought only by the ponderous—if intellectual—of the reviews, and he yearned, like all young and many older men, for appreciation among a larger circle than that round which the narrow and somewhat fossilized brains of the readers of those periodicals revolved. It was all very well sitting in a garret—or rather in his minute study in Clifford's Inn, polishing beautiful little essays on Persian Art, or Greek Culture; and it was all very well being told by dignified editors that no man so young as he was had ever been a writer for their magazines; but he saw himself drifting definitely into a dreary, if desirable, specialism, and Inskip, under his mask at that time, was very human, and wanted to write of and for people, and not for Blue Books.

He consulted Le Measurier, upon whose opinion he set great store. And Le Measurier said, "Be gummy."

Now "gummy" was an office word for that touch of Nature which, etc., etc. When a wife, on quitting her husband for ever, left behind her an anything but agreeable letter, and yet in the postscript begged him, in a few heartbroken words, to look after her canary and break its sugar small—it was gummy. When a bishop said "damn" (he never did, but the *Critic* would sometimes hint it), that was gummy. It was

gummy when royalties dropped their own, or picked up other people's garters (things they unfortunately only did in the more delicious pages of history). It was gummy when a Prime Minister fell sweetly asleep in the middle of his own speech.

Inskip, therefore, thought he knew exactly what "gummy" meant.

He was always passionately interested in his own writings, which, indeed, is the *sine quâ non* of any man who is to succeed in the trade he has made his own. But he fortunately had a keen sense of humour as well, and realised at the outset that this interest was one which he probably would have to share with no one else. He sat up half the night writing half a column, and when he finally had pruned it to his satisfaction, he read it aloud to himself—hot with pleasure. It was the first gummy thing he had ever written, and it delighted him. It was not that it seemed to him so particularly good, for, like all men who mean to succeed, he was the keenest of possible critics of his own work, but it was the best he could do—and that knowledge was a most exquisite joy.

He presented it to his editor at the earliest possible opportunity.

Le Measurier ran his practised eye down it.

"That's not gummy," he said.

Inskip swallowed his mortification as best he could.

"I don't believe," the Scotchman said, thoughtfully, running his fingers through his curly mane, "that a fellow like you could write a gummy article to save his soul."

"Why do you say that?" Inskip queried. He

spoke indifferently, and had never felt so extraordinarily alert and interested in his life.

"It's not that you're a prig—far from it, but you haven't that touch of the *gamin* in you that would help enormously in the matter. It's not coarseness, it's nothing low, it's not snickering sentimentalism, it's not what we mean when we talk of humour, and it's not even brutal. But if you could mix every one of those elements up in a big cauldron, in uneven quantities, and boil 'em up—or is it down?—until a concentrated essence were obtained, then you'd have what I mean."

Hugh was standing rigid, his dark eyes burning in the whiteness of his face. Le Measurier told his wife afterwards that it was the first time he had ever seen Inskip look as if he were suffering agonies of love.

"I see," the man said, and put out his hand for his article. His hand—a long, white hand, characteristically restrained—trembled.

Le Measurier seized the slip of paper and pocketed it.

"No, you don't make off with it," he said. "It will do excellently for to-morrow's paper. And now do you really see what gummy may mean?"

"I believe I do," said Inskip, "and I'm more grateful to you than I can possibly express."

"Oh, that's all right," said Le Measurier, and went off whistling.

That same evening it so happened that Inskip was summoned to Cheltenham to see his father.—Colonel Inskip—with whom he was on none too friendly terms. He boarded the train at Paddington, feeling intensely and quite reasonably, depressed. Cheltenham would

be over-running with long crocodiles of young maidens, and with bathchairs of old men. His father would be in one of these latter, and he would have to accompany him on his constitutional, and again be told what an unpatriotic and egoistical fool he was to renounce the army—the career of all self-respecting colonels' sons—for Fleet Street and short commons.

The train was a corridor—very full.

Inskip could secure a corner seat only in a non-smoker. He leaned back, watching the passengers sort themselves, with lazy interest.

He saw a man and a girl board the train, and pass through several compartments looking for seats. The girl was carrying a little boy of perhaps twelve months old. He noticed her walk, which had a certain individuality. He saw she had soft dark eyes, and a bright colour that came and went fitfully in her cheeks.

The man following her was a vision of polite smiles and gracious manners. Inskip counted three "excuse me's," and two "allow me's" as he followed his wife along the corridor. The two former remarks were made to Inskip and a porter, against each of whom the young man had brushed very gently; the latter were made to two separate maidens in difficulties over the straps of their rugs. He was very good-looking. Inskip wondered if he were a shop-walker—he would have made a delightful one in a woman's shop.

The girl was passing Inskip as the thought flashed through his mind, and as it did so his eyes fell on the face of the child she held.

It was hideously disfigured.

The pretty girl whose strap the young man had

unbuckled was at that moment thanking him when her eyes, too, fell on the child's face. She shuddered all through her body in involuntary distaste.

The young man saw her. She was evidently unaware that the child was his belonging. He raised his hat politely to her; gave a vague, unrecognising glance at his wife, and vanished towards the distant smoker.

But it was the look on the young mother's face that burned into Hugh Inskip's memory. The soft dark eyes followed the retreating figure. She made no effort to claim him. She held her little maimed baby tighter to her breast.

Inskip rose and offered her his seat.

"I am going to dine," he said.

He had never felt in all his existence as he did at that moment. It was as if a mummy had suddenly come to life, and were conscious for the first time of veins charged with hot and furious blood. He wanted to take the man and skin him very slowly, with delicate and deliberate fingers, beginning with his face; he wanted to take the infant and to kiss it before its mother's eyes and say, "oh, you beautiful child; " to say to the girl, "you heroine."

He never went to Cheltenham. He had learned, that half hour, that he was permanently of the type whose thought requires the stimulus of sound and shape. Bath-chairs and querulous invalids were not for him just then. He got out at the first stopping-place and, returning to town, shut himself up in his little study in Clifford's Inn and wrote his first gummy article.

He did it at white heat—a thing he had never done in all his years of studied and deliberate work. He poured forth such biting, such scathing scorn on the young father that the very page upon which he wrote seemed to burn. He described the look in the girl's eyes—the tragic look of wounded motherhood—and as he wrote tears rose to his own.

He flung it at Le Measurier the next morning.

"There—is that gummy? If it's not, I'll never try again."

Le Measurier had a little boy of his own, and he loved his wife. Also he was a gentleman.

"Yes, this is gummy, by *God!*" he answered.

CHAPTER III

AS Inskip, rather warm from his walk on that rainy September evening, reached the Piccadilly Theatre, the curtain was just about to be rung up.

He gave the attendant his Press-ticket, was shown to a seat in the fifth row of the stalls, noticed the house was packed from floor to ceiling, glanced up and down for—but failed to see—Le Measurier's bright head, and had just remarked that, judging from an array of flowers in the stage box, Royalty was present, when the lights went out with dramatic suddenness, the music did a marvellous *volte face* and dropped into a minor key and thence to death, and the curtains fell back, revealing what Inskip, if he had studied his programme, would have known to be the kitchen of a Siberian peasant.

A first-night, and at the "Piccadilly," was an event which still held for him the glamour and romance of the unknown. Dramatic criticism for his paper was a plum which seldom fell to his share, and Le Measurier had only given it to him now because his chief critic was away, and because Inskip's literary and dramatic instinct was so marvellously assured for such a young man that his articles invariably carried with them conviction—if not inspiration; while the accredited expert of the *Critic* was so full on all first-nights of

the soul, the psychology, and the poetry of the affair, that there remained small scope for the description of its body—if it had such a thing.

Le Measurier disliked his dramatic critic, who was a very fine gentleman with an insistent personality which he apparently found it impossible to keep out of his work. Which was putrid, as the Editor said, for though, thank God! each play was different, Bernard Chichester's epigrammatic eloquence was invariably the same. Now if there were anything Inskip could do to perfection it was to lose himself, absolutely and entirely, in his work.

Margaret Stair, the young girl of twenty, who, swiftly and surely, was driving London men and women off their heads with love and *schwärmerei*, was to create "Anna," in the great Russian drama, "Anna Povoliski," to-night.

Inskip, in common with everyone else, had heard enough about this wonderful actress to write a book—for private circulation—but, so far, he had neither seen her on or off the stage. The critiques of her work which he had read had all been in his own paper, for he never looked at another unless obliged to do so for office purposes; and the ecstasies of the eloquent Mr. Chichester (who had remarked in one of his articles that Mrs. Stair was the re-incarnation of Récamier; and in another, that she was like Queen Esther; and in yet another, that she was a Duse—with a figure) had imbued him with no particular desire to see this redoubtable person.

But to-night, either inspired by the tense interest of a play which was poignant and biting from the

moment the curtain rose, or influenced insensibly by the atmosphere of the house—a packed house on the *qui vive* for the entrance of its idol, Inskip felt a strange and delicious excitement creeping through his veins. When was Mrs. Stair to appear?

He knew, like a great number of those present, when the critical moment had arrived. There was a slight lull in the interest of the conversation; Anna's name was mentioned, was taken up by the crowd; she was discussed, praised, condemned. The door opened.

A fat old woman entered. It was a clever enough trick. The audience breathed quickly, and a faint sound crept across and along the theatre—like the whirr of passing wings on a breathless night.

The conversation on the stage became brisker with the advent of the old woman, who proceeded to cook some bacon. One of the peasants was kneeling before the *ikon*, and his bent shoulders in their threadbare coat, his strong profile, his suggestion of an unluxurious reverence, brought to the pressman who was watching a strange, sharp stab, as a question from another world:

"What birthright have I renounced? What have I missed? What have I lost?"

He never saw Margaret's entry. She was on the stage before he knew it. There was a wild burst of applause which would not be quenched, and which had in it something deeper and stronger than the usual feeling of the occasion. Inskip clapped his hands and stamped his feet, too, impelled by the

sudden desire to thank somebody—it mattered not whom—for the vision that faced his eyes.

She was extraordinarily young-looking, even for her age—which was not great, and her face was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen: it seemed to Inskip that night to typify the springtime of the world.

She was walking slowly—very slowly; gazing straight in front of her with dark and dreamy eyes. Inskip felt his manhood awakening and being drawn out of himself—an unwilling enough victim—by their fascination.

Then he wondered at her quietness.

The next moment he understood. Anna was supposed to be asleep. And yet he could not be sure.

Then the solution of the matter came to him: the girl was drugged. That would account for the extraordinarily de-personalised air about her. She moved as one in a dream, and yet in a dream of entire and utter quietude.

The next moment the wild and extravagant applause died out as though heavy doors had beaten down on it, and crushed it back behind them. Inskip had never in all his life heard anything so sudden or so startling. The audience, apparently, knew Mrs. Stair and her methods. She would continue in her motionless dream until they allowed her to begin.

Inskip felt his heart beat in a very unruly manner when he suddenly realised that the beautiful face before him was changing from an exquisite picture into reality. A hundred fleeting emotions were betrayed in it—and she had each emotion in an

absolute control. She spoke—and her voice was low, and full, and sweet, and filled the theatre with music. She smiled—the place was flooded with sunshine.

She had only spoken a few words when the curtain fell on the first act. There was the same wild burst of enthusiasm that had heralded her entry. Mrs. Stair, a vision of delight, with lips parted in a smile, and darkly mysterious eyes, bowed her thanks and took it all for herself—as it was intended. It was true she had but spoken seven lines, while the gentleman who had knelt before the *ikon* had borne the burden and heat of one-third of the evening; but she did not insist on dragging him forward into an unwilling prominence, with that sweet generosity of nature of which we (below the footlights) see so much. She crossed slowly before the curtain; smiling like a happy, unconscious child; waving her hands. Inskip noticed that they were singularly beautiful.

Mr. Chichester had remarked the same thing, and in an epigrammatic aside had suggested that their beauty might have something to do with the constant display Mrs. Stair made of them. Hugh Inskip, however, knew that hands are the most characteristic things in the world, and cannot lie. He felt within him a strong desire to hold in his own those long white fingers.

He went out for a smoke, and met Le Measurier in the corridor.

"I looked for your hair," said Mr. Inskip, "on the moment of my arrival. But I could see it nowhere."

"Ah," said the little editor, "I have been sitting with crowned heads."

Inskip remembered the flowers in the stage-box, and looked up with lazy interest.

"I thought they lacked the spirit of adventure, and never came to first-nights."

"When I speak of crowned heads I am anticipating," said Le Measurier, "but consider the excuse I have for my state of confusion. Here am I, the red-haired, ordinary, business-like editor of an Imperialist paper, sitting quietly in my place in the stalls, hoping I may not be bored, when behold! a tap on my shoulder. I look up to meet the impassive eyes of an equerry, all stars and garters. 'Mr. Le Measurier, I believe?' says the gorgeous one. I bow. 'His Royal Highness the Crown Prince Marie-Josef Alexis Christian of Poland desires that you visit him in his box.'"

"That—cub?"

Inskip spoke with a sudden biting emphasis. He could not have explained why, but the Crown Prince's name, coupled as it was with the story of him and his infatuation for Mrs. Stair, which was the talk of the clubs, aroused in him that moment a certain hot indignation that blazed up like a celluloid fire. It died as quickly as it was born. What did such a thing as that matter, when all was said and done? Who was he, himself, to feel a revulsion at the thought of such an ordinary episode in the life of a stage favourite?

Le Measurier glanced at him in some surprise.

"He is young, certainly, but so polished that one could hardly call him a cub."

"Why did he want to know you?" Inskip asked, none too politely.

Le Measurier shrugged his shoulders, then laughed his jolly, boisterous laugh.

"He selected me because my hair was red. He thought I must have a temperament. Said it, too. Quaint, wasn't it? He had asked his equerry to point out the newspaper men to him—and I appealed to him the most."

"What does he want you to do for him?" asked Inskip, who was not laughing at all.

"The boy seemed to have some sort of an idea that a word or two from a high serenity like himself might bring an extra column of praise for his divine Anna in to-morrow's paper."

"How ghastly!"

"Yes, wasn't it? It was very lucky he selected me for his request. If it had been one or two of the others, to-morrow would have brought some nasty notices for Mrs. Stair. As it was, I simply told him that such a thing was not done—and the episode closed. He was very decent, and said no more except to ask me to share his box for the remainder of the evening. He grew very nervous towards the time for Anna's appearance, and walked up and down at the back of the chairs muttering 'Gott in Heaven!'"

"Very touching, indeed," said Inskip, drily.

Again Le Measurier glanced up in surprise. There was so unusual a flavour of bitterness in his young comrade's tone. But Inskip's long dark face was impassive enough.

"It seemed to me a deplorable lack of confidence in his divinity. One can't conceive Margaret Stair mulling anything; she's got her art at her fingers' tips.

She's the only actress we have who can play tragedy and comedy well. I don't say *equally* well, for she is a born *tragedienne*. Have you seen her Juliet?"

"I have never seen her before," said Inskip.

They flung away their cigarettes as the warning bell was heard. And Inskip hurried back to his place.

As the play progressed, and the story of love and passion and murder unfolded itself before the bewitched audience, Inskip, moved beyond himself, was awakened to an almost painfully keen observation of Mrs. Stair's "methods." She was the greatest *tragedienne* it were possible to conceive. She had no high notes, no hysteria, no sobs, very little passion—in gesture, and yet she tore the heart out of each of her hearers, and drew tears to the eyes of most of them. The only ones who did not like her, who called her "cold," were the men or women who, while they could recognise the violences of passion, could not recognise its reticences, its restraints.

She had the most exquisite voice that was ever given to a woman by the God Whose mind conceived that the most suggestive and the most enduring of His gifts should be disembodied and invisible. Its tone was deep and full, with no tremolo in it, but rather the real, haunting, passion of enchantment of which the tremolo is but the meretricious counterfeit. Her actions were slow—slow to a very noticeable extent, but her face was marvellously flexible. You could read upon its open book a thousand thoughts. She was so graceful that she had but to stand still and the picture was perfect. During the whole of the play she never once made—or needed to make—one

of those irritating displays of a trailing skirt, so necessary, apparently, to the ordinary heroine, so puzzling to the ordinary spectator who, himself, is quite able to converse for fifteen minutes without changing his position thirty times.

She loved a Russian peasant. She was the mother of his child. When he left her for another woman she killed herself, dying on his doorstep. It was a poignant, but ugly, gloomy, quite ordinary story, in a foreign setting. Margaret Stair's acting made it the primal story of the world.

As the curtain rang down for the last time the applause was terrific. The company, *en bloc*, took one cail; Margaret Stair, her arms full of red roses, roses and carnations falling with soft violence upon her from every direction, was recalled twenty times. She waved her hands at her delighted audience, and laughed her pleasure at them with the careless abandon of a child.

As Inskip was leaving the theatre Le Measurier strolled up to him.

"My crowned head is giving a supper-party on the stage to the company and some of the newspaper-men. He told me to ask any of my friends to come who would care to do so. Would you?"

"Tell him to go to hell," said Inskip.

Le Measurier grinned.

"You'll make a tactful editor, my son, when your time comes. How did you like the show?"

"I have written words to the effect that the play was rotten," said Inskip, "but that Mrs. Stair's acting was magnificent."

They stood together smoking in the rapidly emptying corridor. Le Measurier was looking at the photographs of the members of the "Anna Povolski" company which lined the walls.

"She's a wonderful creature," he said. "One cannot quite say where her charm lies. She's passionless from the mouth upwards, but the mouth——!" He raised his eyebrows whimsically. "It may be her air of undying youth. She grips these parts like the most hardened sinner; she doesn't lose an iota of all their significance—but through it all she's so extraordinarily *young*."

Inskip was putting finishing touches to his article, which was exceedingly brief. He appeared to be paying no attention to his editor's remarks.

The theatre now was quite empty. Le Measurier's cigar was finished, and he turned towards the long corridor.

"Well, good-night, Inskip. I think you're a fool not to come to the party. There's not a ghost of patronage in it—the boy only thinks he is making friends for his beautiful lady. And I should have thought you would have liked to have seen her off the stage."

"Is Mrs. Stair to be present?" Inskip asked with sudden interest.

"Why, of course she is, man. The whole company's to be there."

"In that case," said Inskip, "I will come."

He never forgot that night in after years. The lights in the auditorium were turned out, but the stage, which recently had portrayed a Russian village in mid-

winter, had had a soft pink carpet flung over its paper snow; and innumerable little tables, laid for supper were placed upon it.

When Le Mesurier and Inskip strode up from the orchestra chairs there were general introductions to those members of the company who were present. Mrs. Stair had not yet appeared. She was exhausted after the strain of her last act.

Neither was the Prince there at first. A little soubrette, who persisted in lighting her cigarette at Inskip's, much to his embarrassment, told him that Alexis was probably helping Margaret to get warm again after her long deathbed in the snow.

Inskip, furious, he knew not why, let his cigarette go out to get rid of her.

Then there was an opened door, and with no ceremony, and certainly with no stiffness, men and women rose to their feet.

The Crown Prince entered gaily, carrying an armful of Margaret's red roses, which he deposited on various tables.

Inskip looked at him. He was a mere lad, tall and slight, with a fair, pointed beard, and the bluest of blue eyes. He smiled at them all, and there was a gleam of white teeth. That he was tremendously excited was evident. His blue eyes told their own tale.

"I have been detained. Von tousand pardons," he said, with a strong foreign accent. "But vot a night, vot a night!"

Le Measurier led Inskip up and presented him. The Prince gave him a red rose.

"Keep it," he said, "keep it as a memento of this so happy an occasion."

A waiter was bringing in cups of soup and covered plates; the little *oubrette* was flinging roses at Inskip, who longed to strangle her. Le Measurier and another critic were discussing the play in careful undertones. Neither man seemed to have been very much impressed by anything save the genius of the star lady. Inskip, his ears very much on the alert just then, heard their voices.

"Margaret Stair, you know, is working her temperament to a frightful extent. She's all temperament and no technique, in fact."

"And the best thing in the world, too," Inskip heard the impetuous, but carefully subdued tones of his editor's reply.

"But what is she to fall back upon when her temperament fails her?"

"Why need it fail her?"

"This little affair"—with a wave of the hand—"can't last for ever. There was some talk of a morганatic marriage, but that's fallen through. What's to happen when the crisis comes?"

Inskip moved away. He wished to hear no more. And the rest of the carefully subdued conversation was lost to him.

Then there was a general outburst of cheering and clapping of hands, and a slight, girlish figure came dancing down the stage.

Inskip drew in his breath sharply. Was *this* the woman who had drawn tears from all eyes so short a time ago; the woman who had sobbed her life away

on her lover's doorstep, passion, terror, tragedy, and remorse in every line of her face—in every restraint of her gesture?

He was struck again by her extraordinary youth, but what appealed to him with an entire freshness was the wonderful air of happiness and vitality that clothed her like a many-coloured garment. Her very walk was gaiety itself. It reminded him of the delicate prancing of some young horse in a field, enamoured of itself and the joy of life. Her vivid and beautiful face had a certain purity of expression underlying it which Inskip had never met on such a face before. As Le Meaurier had said, "It was passionless from the mouth upwards." Her eyes were dark, enigmatic, not with the small inscrutabilities of many of her wayward sex, but with a mystery which seemed unfathomable and profound. They were full, too, of suggestions—and the suggestions had nothing in them that was vile. Her dark hair was still dressed as it had been in her last scene, hanging down in two long plaits tied with golden braid, but she now wore a short, soft, white gown, and on her head was a fillet of closely-meshed emeralds.

Inskip's eyes fell on her beautiful, unringed hands. Suddenly he wanted to touch them.

He was introduced to her as the *Critic*—tout court.

She laughed, a soft low monotone, full of merriment.

"You may be the *Critic*, but, thank God! you're not Mr. Chichester," she said.

Inskip, immediately interested, amused, but very loyal, made no reply.

She laughed again.

"If you were he, or if he were you, the *Critic's* readers to-morrow would learn that I closely resemble three of the lesser-known Grecian deities. That the play had direct relationship with several of Chaucer's works—with a touch of Nietzsche. And that Mr. Chichester had been to Oxford and had won a double first and the Newdigate prize—a fact of which everybody by now must be well aware."

Inskip laughed because he could not help it. It was so very true.

"My little criticism is faulty, but enthusiastic," he said.

He was still watching her hands. They were the most beautiful things he had ever seen—and the most tragic. They were the hands of a woman made to suffer. Long, supple, with quivering fingers alive to their very tips. They would always give too much to life, and expect too much in return.

He raised his eyes to Margaret's face. She was still radiant and smiling.

"Oh, have you written it?" she asked.

He glanced at his watch.

"It is now in the compositors' room, most probably," he answered.

She did not ask him what he had said, for which, indeed, he blessed her. She seemed suddenly to tire of the conversation, or perhaps it was of standing still. She gave him a little fleeting smile, a farewell touch on the arm with her fan, and moved away.

Inskip could not keep his eyes off her at supper. He could have told you afterwards neither what he ate, whom he sat next, nor of what he talked to her

about. Margaret's little round table was in the centre of the stage. She had on her right hand the Prince, and on her left the chief sub-editor of an American paper—a man with magnificent flashing grey eyes. They swept over Margaret's lovely face and form unceasingly with a warm and devouring gaze.

She could not have been unaware of his mood, for it was evident enough even to Inskip, but she was, apparently, indifferent to it and to him. She looked at him through the veil of her eyelashes with the same radiant, happy, and childlike smile that she had for everyone. As the meal progressed the American's condition became pitiable.

The stage was intolerably warm. The hot and scented air from the auditorium floated over the footlights in heavy, sensual waves, and beat on Inskip's temples, which were throbbing unendurably. The atmosphere was thick with the smell of wines, and food, and tobacco. He looked around him at the company.

The men were some of them good-looking, and all of them, in appearance at any rate, very intelligent; but upon each and all was the trade-mark of the stage. None was absolutely natural, or if he were it simply meant that it was natural to him to be theatrical. It might have been the presence of so many of a profession they had grown to fear more than hell, or it might be that none of them yet had quite been able to throw off the mantle of his evening's work, but upon each and all was the brand of the *poseur*.

He looked at the women; indifferently, but obser-

vantly. Some of them were pretty, all were terribly "smart," but nearly every one of them had the same brand on their faces. They looked as if they knew everything there was to know—of the things that did not matter. It was the most pitiable of all the ignorances—and the most commonplace. They were all very "knowing": but what did they know?

And then his eyes wandered back to that centre table, and to the vivid, glowing face of the girl who sat there. She was leaning forward now, her elbows resting lightly on the cloth, listening to Le Measurier, who was talking vivaciously to her from his seat opposite. Her lips were parted like a child's. She looked more extraordinarily out of place in that throng than it was possible to describe.

Inskip's thoughts turned idly to the conversation he had heard that evening; and, for almost the first time in his life, he speculated on the affairs of a woman in relation to her lover. It was a curved road round which his imagination had rarely played. Even in his writings for purely mercenary reasons he left these things severely alone, taking the view that sex problems could be solved more by physiological than by psychological analysis.

But to-night, from the first moment he saw the young girl enter the peasant's cottage, the eternal problem of life had been beating about his brain. How could a woman with so pure and lovely a face bring herself to a mere matter of commerce, throw herself away on, and be "run" by, a stripling of royalty, give him the best of her youth and her beauty

and her genius? She seemed, to Inskip, like a lovely and exquisitely-shaped vase, moulded and destined for the glory of a lifetime—given over to coarse and common hands to be broken.

The supper-party was growing hilarious. The soubrette was drinking champagne from her slipper, and her partner was doing the same. Toasts were called for and given, including all the Polish Royal Family, which Inskip thought distinctly humorous, considering the occasion.

Then someone called for the heroine of the evening. She was seized by willing hands and placed on a table, and a speech was demanded from her. She stood there, radiant, happy, very pale, laughing and refusing. They pelted her with roses, till the table she stood upon was deep blood-red.

It was Le Measurier who broke up the party. His keen eye had been upon the little soubrette for some time, and he decided she had better go home before she had to be taken there.

There was wild confusion for some minutes, everyone was talking at once and thanking his royal host for a delightful party. He stood up, stiff and straight—a not unroyal figure—and bowed graciously right and left.

Inskip discovered when he was half-way down the corridor that he had left his opera hat somewhere on the stage, and, quitting Le Measurier, he went back hastily for it.

And it was then that he received one of the great surprises of his life.

The stage was now in semi-darkness, but even so it

glowed like a warm and liquid jewel seen from the dark of the auditorium. Alone on it were two figures—a boy, tall, and straight, in a brightly-coloured uniform, with many orders on his breast; and a girl in a soft white gown.

He was holding out his arms.

She was standing a few feet away from him, looking at him with eyes which Inskip never forgot. In them burned passion, love, tenderness — unutterable, womanly tenderness. All her gaiety seemed to have dropped from her like a showy garment. She looked a little tired; there was even a hint of that sad loveliness we call pathos. But through the tenderness, and underneath the passion, seemed a sort of proud gladness. It was as if she were saying, "I give you everything: my youth, my beauty, my genius. Take it—it is yours."

So did the man, watching, see her weaving the web of her destiny.

"Phew," said Le Measurier, as they crossed the Circus (Inskip hatless), "wasn't it loathsome?"

"It was the most beautiful thing I ever saw," Inskip answered slowly; but, fortunately for him, his reply was unheard.

CHAPTER IV

THE beginning of Inskip's success as a writer coincided with his attendance at the "Piccadilly" supper-party.

He still refused steadfastly to bind himself with the chains of an editorship. He wrote parliamentary articles for the *Critic* instead; did two or three "London Letters" for provincial papers (whose readers marvelled at the continuous propriety of their brothers in the great city—for Inskip was no scandal-monger); did Sunday interviews with any notability who was neither an actress, a popular preacher, nor a feminist (all of whom he considered had as much notoriety as was good for them in other ways), and reviewed books and criticised the more serious plays for his own paper.

This left him with a fair amount of time on his hands which he employed in more writing—to please himself. The tragedy of that little matter hitherto had been that the business usually ended there. He could not, agonise though he might, please anybody else. The only thing he had ever written which brought him the warm approval of an opinion he valued was his sketch of the girl in the train, which Le Measurier had said was gummy.

But, after that night at the Piccadilly, unconsciously perhaps, he began to shed, little by little, the tragical

view he had taken of life ; not because the tragedy of life really seemed to him less, but because his philosophy had become greater. He could write now of the pain of the world and leave his readers with a hope that the pain might be assuaged—and a definite desire to have a share in the doing of it.

Hitherto in his writings, admirable and scholarly though they might have been, he was like a school-master who has the faculty of absorbing the enthusiasm of his pupils, but the disastrous inability to pass the enthusiasm on to other, and non-personal, subjects.

He knew very well what had given him this new-found power, and he never entirely forgot the debt of gratitude he owed the unconscious Mrs. Stair.

He had gone back to his empty flat that night, and, for the first time, he was not alone. Up to now he had known, through years of disillusionment, nearly everything there was to know about sorrow, but very little about happiness. On this night—or very early morning (for it was two o'clock before he reached Clifford's Inn), he was conscious of a wild beating at his heart—pain, pleasure, and a Glorious Hope.

Somewhere out in the world of space, something, as beautiful and as visionary as the little star that twinkled through the thin cloud of the night-sky above his head, was waiting for him. . . Neither knew the other—yet ; he did not wish that they should—yet ; but, somewhere in the Great Unknown, his mate, his other self, was awaiting him. Some day he, too, should stand with open arms. . . Some

day she, too, should come to him, like Margaret to her lover.

His life up to now, as Le Mesurier had hinted to his wife, had not been entirely devoid of secular interest. If it had been, the intense and absolute loneliness of it would probably have driven him off his head; for everyone who has had anything to do with geniuses (and Inskip had a genius for writing things too good for his public) knows that there is a weak spot in these fascinating creatures—an occasional tendency to go mad. But through it all—the rapture and roses, the disillusionments, the self-conquests, the gradual self-knowledge, the definite drifting towards higher things, he had kept a beautiful little flame of idealism very bright for the girl who one day would be his wife.

He did not know her face, because he never looked for it—faces for this extraordinary young man playing a very small part in the scheme of things. She would not, of course, be unattractive. Her eyes would probably be soft and dark, and her mouth a kissable one. (Inskip had never kissed a woman yet, and he never wanted to do so. He hardly knew himself what he meant by this.) But the mind and temperament of this idyllic creature he knew by heart—or by his intellect, which with him was much the same thing. She was very, very "white"—but not colourless: she was a Delilah—with a conscience: a Sappho—with a pure mind: a Joan of Arc with a human mission—himself.

She was of immense interest to him in his dreariness—this visionary being. She had all his own tricks of

dislike by heart, and never made a mistake as a more tangible creation would have been certain to have done. She was always silent unless she had something to say—a beautiful thing in woman, for the teaching of which Inskip often wondered why the State did not provide compulsory colleges. When she said things they were merry, or sad, or tender, but always true, invariably sincere and an expression of herself at the time of utterance. She never retailed disagreeable stories about other women; and she never led him on to say foolish things to her and then became all marble and soul and reproachful glances—two little tricks of which Inskip already, even in his inexperience of her sex, was well aware.

But the night of the theatre he took her to live with him in his little flat for the first time.

It made a wonderful difference to all his work, for his mythical mate was what all mythical and so few real mates are—absolutely one with her comrade. He read to her his essays. Sometimes she said, "*Stodgy, Hugh!*" and immediately he would spring to his feet, close the book, and have no more to do with it till his mind had been shaken up again to the necessary lightness. Sometimes she would raise a long white finger (Inskip knew her hands inch by inch, and vein by vein), and say, "I don't understand what you're talking about. Be simple. It's so easy to be difficult: and it's so difficult to be easy."

This was a fact he had never learned until she pointed it out to him with her marvellously certain intuition, and when he had grasped her point it was of an enormous help to him in his work. Hitherto

he had rather prided himself on his style—which was Meredithian, as was the style of most young writers at the end of the nineteenth century; henceforward he became a model of clarity, and he was immediately, as a reward (such is blind justice!) put on the drier leader work of his paper, and required to explain in simple and explicit form the more involved flights of law of the somewhat hot-headed, though well-meaning, Government then in power at St. Stephen's.

Again, his wife would frown and raise her finger "Don't write coarsely," she would say. "It may be your mood at the moment, for man is only human; but you will be frightfully sorry for it afterwards."

Hugh would argue this point with her hotly, for he never wrote coarsely, because he never thought coarsely, and he had learned long ago that, if a man will keep bit and bridle upon his thoughts in that direction, his writings may career towards a precipice without a brake and no harm happen.

"Like all women you say 'coarse' when you mean 'brutal,'" he told her.

She made a *moue* with her kissable mouth.

"Why need you be either?" She was deliciously and incurably feminine. She never convinced him in that matter, and he never convinced her. He continued to write the most brutal things and read them aloud to her; and she continued to shudder and to murmur "terribly coarse!" as long as they lived together.

The only difference this made to Inskip was to impress upon him the absolute and fundamental

difference between man and woman in the facing of facts. His first thought was that the Serpent, upon whom was thrown the primary burden of teaching facts to one of them, must have been an exquisitely delicate reptile in his methods to have accomplished anything: his second thought was that he must make his little flat in Clifford's Inn more feminine and worthier of so gentle an occupant.

He went to Liberty's shop, and bought beautiful panels of Spanish leather, with faint gildings and patterns of mauve and blue and soft pink burnt into them. And he bought long curtains of orange velvet. There was some difficulty about this latter purchase for Hugh had always thought chiffon was velvet and velvet chiffon, but he got what he wanted at last. He had the curtains lined with black, to the horror of Liberty's artistic young saleswoman; but when he told her, quite simply and naturally, that he lived in Clifford's Inn, and had no desire to draw attention to his gorgeous windows, she smiled sweetly and understood everything. As they do!

He made his little study very lovely, for the long panels on the walls glowed in a myriad exquisite colours, and the bright curtains seemed to hold all the beauty and the mystery of womanhood in their orange-coloured folds.

When the vision and Inskip had lived together two or three months they had a dear little baby—a charming infant that arrived with an entire absence of discomfort and fuss. Hugh “took to” this delightful child from the first, as was small wonder, for not only was its nose a model of shapeliness, but it never cried

at night, had a delicious way of cooing "dadda," and flourished quite remarkably in the rich and health-giving odours that wafted around Clifford's Inn that August.

But alas! it was the beginning of the end.

At first all was well. Hugh, who knew nothing at all about domestic matters, but was convinced he knew everything, was more delighted with his wife than words can describe; and so careful of her that he would not allow her to leave her room until quite a week after the new arrival. It was during that week that the mischief occurred.

He began by constantly going in to see how she was, and reading to her some of his lighter and more interesting articles. Then he began to call through the wall instead; and, before the eighth day was over, he had learned to do without her entirely—a fact which she, with that remarkable adaptation to circumstances which seems to be the exclusive property of the visionary world, appeared to grasp in a minute. With all her old sympathy she merely gave her husband one soft and tender glance, took the beautiful child by the hand, and vanished into thin air.

It was the middle of a long heat-wave, and Inskip, who by then had a fair income, took a six months' holiday in Brittany, and came back so little of a widower, and so much of a bachelor, that he was astonished and dismayed when his eyes first fell on the orange velvet curtains.

It was about that time, and quite inevitably, that he began to write his first play.

He knew, as everyone who tries his hand at this

sort of thing intelligently, must know, that there are two methods of doing it, either of which is obligatory if his play is to be accepted (and that is the *pons asinorum* which must be crossed before the higher mathematics of success are obtained).

Either he must select his actor or actress, study them mercilessly (but mentally) under a microscope; learn their good qualities and write for them; learn their limitations and never give them a part that exceeds them; and, having done this, begin on his play, which, far from being an exposition of life as it is, is rather to be a brilliant apotheosis of the talent of "Mrs. Cunningham-Johnson," or "Sir Achilles Mental-Nelson."

Inskip had the faculty for merciless observation, and a marvellously accurate understanding of the limitations—of other people. But there he stopped. It might have been that intolerable wisdom of his conscience which prevented him from inflaming the imagination of an audience at the cost of truth; but—more probably—it was that he entirely lacked that strange, sardonic humour which makes this sort of thing not only possible, but entertaining to many a brilliant playwright.

The other method of work was the one he selected.

It, of course, was to aim at a simple, amusing, or tragic story, elaborate every character with the greatest care until not one was without its own interest, however small; give an equal display of limelight effects to three or four of his heroes or heroines; and then send, after infinite pruning and infinite pains, the result of it all to a leading actor-manager.

Inskip's name was well-known by now as that of a coming man, and his play had the courtesy proffered it of a speedy perusal. But it was returned to him a speedily, with a polite intimation of its unsuitability.

Hugh was horribly mortified, having bestowed on his ill-used offspring much of the tender care of a mother on her first-born.

He sent it to Mrs. Stair, and asked for her honest criticism.

She wrote back in two days.

"Your play is very clever and very human, but you'll never get a 'star' to take it. We all want to be planets nowadays, and you have made us even more earthly than we are."

Le Measurier, for whose advice Inskip often asked, told him it was no good to do that sort of thing except in dialogue or costume.

"Make it 'damned Scotch,'" he said, "or put the period back a hundred years and dress 'em all in crinolines, and it's just possible you may have a *flair*."

Inskip chose the crinoline suggestion, sent his play to a manager who was not an actor-manager, had a lengthy interview, made a few technical alterations, and his play ran for fifteen months without a break, which, of course, meant a very great success. His name and photograph were constantly in magazines, and he was sometimes requested for his autograph by gentle maidens with literary aspirations.

But at his heart, all the while, was a great craving, which he could hardly understand, and which he could never satisfy.

In the earlier years, when the drudgery of Fleet

Street seemed intolerable, he had longed with a passionate desire for the day when he might be his own master: do the work he loved most: leave untouched everything that did not interest him vitally.

But now, when the hour had come, there was still before him a Future, beckoning to him, revealing to him a promise of something so enchanting, so enthralling, that the very freedom of the Present seemed a serfdom, and he a slave.

His clever play; his polished articles; those flashes of strange, almost inhuman intuition, which made his work seem something of an anachronism, did not bring him one throb, never gave him one single thrill of pleasure.

He wondered if this were because his writings were mostly of dead things; of Greek art, and Persian poetry, and of papyrus and the morals of the Pharaohs. He thought probably it was so; and he changed his work and began to write, with all his eloquence, and with all that restraint which is so much more enduring in its results than passion, on the crying needs of the day.

He wrote of bad water; of worse milk; of adulterated food; of child-labour; of the debasing work forced on young, expectant mothers; and he wrote with such sincerity that he left a solid contribution to enduring thought.

When he had first come to London, and had learned the horrors of all these evils, his soul had cried out in a cold yet passionate revolt against the God of Things as They Are. It was a phase through which he, in common with all men and women who think,

was bound to pass, and it was a miracle that he had ever attained to anything different. But in time he had learned to think, with Stevenson :—

“ . . . That beauty and terror are only one, not two.
And the world has room for love, and death, and thunder,
and dew.

And all the sinews of hell slumber in summer air.
And the face of God is a rock, but the face of the rock is fair.
Beneficent streams of tears flow at the finger of pain.
And, out of the cloud that smites, beneficent rivers of rain.”

His articles gave him a certain amount of happiness, and one of them especially—a series dealing with the milk-supply of London—was of enduring value.

But the old pain was still gnawing at his heart. He could not tell why he was unhappy, but the fact that there was a great void in his life, and a great craving to have it filled, became so evident to him that he spoke of it to Le Measurier one night when they were smoking together in Inskip's flat in Clifford's Inn.

“It's the eternal monotony of life,” he said, “that is half the pain of living. Or rather, I should say, it is the vision of that dim and glorious future always there, becoming in its time the monotony of the present, giving up its own place to another future, still beckoning, still glorious, till it, too, comes nearer, and the vision fades.”

“What you want,” said Le Measurier, “is a woman in your life.”

“Women are not good for me. And they are not good for my work,” said Inskip.

Le Measurier glanced at him for a second.

“What I mean is you ought to marry,” he said,

"You say that much as though you were telling me to go for a walk before breakfast."

"Your work and you will never be really human," said Le Mesurier, "until you have a wife and a child."

"You talk," said Inskip, "as though to be *really human* were to be immortal. This constant talk of women and their influence on a man wearies me. I do not want their *influence*. I want to carve my own career *unaided*."

Le Mesurier began to pace up and down the room.

"Yes," he said, "and that is exactly where the mischief lies with you. You think that your career, and your miserable genius for writing, are all that God meant for you when He sent you down to this weary world. What's your career—what's any man's career—compared with his love for his wife and his child? What does your genius come to when all is said and done? Genius only means the diseased development of some faculty at the expense of another. In its own way, and in its own environment, though perhaps not of its own volition, a *foie gras* is a genius—and a palatable one."

Inskip was smoking furiously, but he removed his pipe at once.

"No woman yet created," he said, "would look twice at such a nervy, irritable person as myself in the light of a prospective husband. And as for my being a father——"

He glanced at his orange curtains, remembered the beautiful child who had vanished in so summary a fashion, and resumed his pipe.

The little Scotchman was still pacing restlessly up

and down the room, his hands in his pockets, his brows knit.

"It is impossible to talk to such a clever fool as you, Inskip, because you neither know you are clever nor that you are a fool. You don't know what you've got, and you don't know what you've lost. You are always asking extraordinary things of life that life cannot possibly grant you: the divine and lovely things that life can offer you ignore. You're just the same about your work, for ever attempting to sound the limits of the ocean, when all you need do is to ascertain the direction of the currents. If ever you marry—God help the girl, if she loves you. If you *don't* marry"—he stopped abruptly in his restless walk and faced Inskip—"if you don't marry, God help *you*! I tell you there's no tragedy in the world worse than that of a man who gains everything that his brains can fetch him, and who returns with his laurels to his home . . . and there's no one there."

CHAPTER V

SHORTLY after this conversation at Clifford's Inn, Hugh Inskip lost both his father and a wealthy uncle.

From the former he received a letter—dated six years ago—informing him that he had been the greatest disappointment of Colonel Inskip's life: from the latter he inherited a large fortune which would probably bring him over a thousand a year.

This difference in his finances made few changes in his life. He had always had a great desire to travel extensively in Russia, and he did so now for six months; but on his return he still worked as hard as ever, and, except that he fitted up a luxurious bathroom in his flat in Clifford's Inn, and engaged as a manservant one who had served Colonel Inskip for many years in the same capacity, he lived exactly as he had always done.

He had two plays running in different London theatres, and there was some talk of his writing a comedy for Mrs. Stair, who steadfastly refused, however, to look at a tragedy unless it were written by her own particular playwright.

Inskip had seen Margaret Stair on many occasions since his first vision of her on the stage. She still typified for him "the eternal springtime of life." He could imagine no other woman who could be so great,

and yet be so entirely unspoiled by her success. There was about her a direct sincerity, an absolute and infectious naturalness, and a gay and almost insolent youth, that made her the most fascinating, as she was the most beautiful woman in London.

There were rumours which Inskip heard from time to time, and loathed himself for listening to them—rumours that the Polish Crown Prince's freedom would shortly be at an end, that, as his father was dying of a lingering disease, he would, for reasons of State, be obliged to leave London (where he was ostensibly studying English politics), and return to his native country.

The probable effect on Margaret Stair was speculated upon with much interest.

"The girl will break her heart—and be a greater actress than ever," said Le Measurier. "It's these women with broken hearts who do all the great things of the world—from the Madonna downwards."

"She's a great enough actress already," replied the man to whom this was said, "and she's happy."

"But she is bound to come to the end of her tether. She has not done so yet, but if things go on as they are doing it is certain to happen. Then, if this episode be smashed up, she will gain that subtle thing which though it cannot be taught, may at least be learned."

When Hugh Inskip overheard the two men talking, his mind went back to that little scene on the stage of the Piccadilly which had never been meant for his eyes.

With all his heart he hoped the girl might not live to learn what happiness could not teach her.

He went to see her on the following afternoon at the Savoy Hotel, where she had a luxurious suite of rooms on the second floor. She was alone, for a wonder, lying on a soft rug on the floor like a child, playing with a small white kitten. As the porter announced him, she jumped up, a miracle of beauty and grace in a soft pink gown that harmonised with her dark eyes and hair and southern colouring.

"Ring the bell, and we'll have tea," she said.

Then she sat down on the rug again, and played with her white kitten.

They were the most graceful pair Inskip had ever seen. Margaret put out her beautifully-shaped arm, from which the sleeve fell back and revealed its exquisite moulding; the white kitten, lifting its dainty feet with precision, walked up to the girl's shoulder and round her neck to the other shoulder; then, with a slight movement of her body, Margaret helped the little creature to slide down again to the ground.

She looked up suddenly at Inskip as he was drinking his tea.

"How do you like being rich?" she asked him.

"It made it possible for me to go to Russia—otherwise I don't know that it elates me particularly," he replied.

The kitten had grown tired of its little game, and was now careering about after its own bushy tail. Margaret had changed her position, and was lying forward on the hearthrug, gazing at the fire. Inskip could only see her beautiful profile, and one of those white, long-fingered hands which was resting on the ground. He found the picture sufficiently attractive.

For a moment his mind hovered round the girl's destiny. It seemed to him an unspeakable and unholy thing that such genius and such beauty should be shaped for anything that was not good and pure. He could never bear to think about the stories he heard; whenever men talked to him of Mrs. Stair's jewels, her marvellous furs and laces, her suite at the Savoy, her motor-cars—and the giver thereof, he always forced his mind back to that night when he had seen her standing offering a very Paradise of requital to her boy Prince.

"I wonder," Mrs. Stair began, slowly, "I wonder how it would feel to be very, very poor again."

"One would have to leave the Savoy pretty quick."

She twisted herself round on the rug, and looked up at him with the soft dark eyes which were the one melancholy thing in her face—and yet it was not melancholy exactly, but rather a haunting, fleeting expression of sadness.

"Sometimes," she said, "I have a dream—not when I am asleep in bed, but at times like this when I am alone, lying by the fire here. I am very seldom alone, you know——" She paused. "Thank God for that," she added. "Loneliness would drive me mad."

"My dream is always the same. It is this: I am quite a poor woman, living in a little cottage outside a village in Poland. I am beautiful"—she threw back her lovely head, and gave Inskip a glance, half-deprecating, half-proud—"but so poor that I only have one best dress for two years. It is of white piqué, and I made it myself, and wear it on Communion Sundays at the little church in the village. I

live with my husband——" there was an unutterable melancholy in the exquisite voice, and Inskip felt his heart leap suddenly in his side. "He is called Hans, and we are all the world to one another. I am not clever—I could not act, even if I wanted to do so, and Hans—Hans is of lowly birth, and simple ideas. We are not afraid to have children. We have two—a boy and a girl. The entry of their birth is in the big Bible on our parlour-table, just beneath the entry of my marriage. Hans loves the little girl with all his heart, because she is like me. We christened her Margaret, but Hans calls her Magda. The little boy is Pierre. He is delicate, and that is another tie between my husband and me. Hans is a woodcutter, and works all day in the forest. I clean and cook and bake, and teach the children, for they are too young to go to school. Hans comes home in the evening, and we put the little ones to bed. Magda lisps her prayers at his knee. She says, '*Dod bess Mudder and Faver.*'" The beautiful voice was now exactly like that of a tired child.

"Then Hans and I sit in our little parlour together, side by side. And he loves me . . . and I know I shall have him all my life till death parts us."

She stopped abruptly.

"Isn't that a funny dream?" she asked.

"I cannot imagine you cooking and baking with those hands," Inskip said. He could think of no other remark to make, and it sounded inane in his own ears.

"Do you ever have day-dreams?" she asked, suddenly.

"Sometimes I think I have nothing else," he

answered, and then he stopped abruptly. He had never spoken to a woman so intimately before. He tried to turn the conversation.

"What do you call your kitten?" he asked.

"Tell me about your dreams," said Margaret.

"I think all kittens should be called 'Fluff'—don't you?"

"Tell me about your dreams."

"Have you heard that interesting story about Lord Roberts and a Cheshire cat?"

"Tell me about your dreams."

Such persistence deserved reward. Inskip paused in the remark he was about to make about landladies' cats, and looked down at Margaret's charming face.

"My dreams would only bore you," he said.

"I am *never* bored," she told him.

Suddenly he determined to humour her. She was so entirely, and so extraordinarily un-selfconscious herself that to feel self-consciousness over any personal revelation were impossible. Had she not, a minute ago, perhaps unaware that he would understand, revealed the tragedy of her own life?

"Which daydream will you have?" he asked half-laughingly.

"How many have you?"

"Three, I think."

"Tell me the nicest first," said Margaret, looking like an adorable child.

"I don't know about it being the nicest," said Inskip, "but I've had this dream more constantly than any other. I am one of a large family, five boys and three girls. We live in a large house on a cliff over-

looking the sea. The cliff has a tunnel running through it, and we boys made a sort of pirates' cave there, and waylaid the girls as they passed, and demanded ransom for them. We had a little boat of our own in which we went fishing every afternoon, and we brought the fish to our cave and cooked it for tea. On winter evenings we played hide-and-seek in the house. It was a beautiful old house, with winding corridors and secret chambers, and in every room was the smell and sound of the sea. My father was a doctor and quite young, and my mother adored him and us. She had a soft, delicious voice, and beautiful grey eyes. She used to group us round her at night, before the kiddies went to bed, and sing to us, in the loveliest voice you ever heard, simple little Scotch and Irish songs with a lilt in them. I often hear her."

Margaret was listening with parted lips and shining eyes.

"And the real Hugh Inskip's home?" she asked.

"My father was sixty when I was born. He was a colonel in the army, and thought of nothing else. My mother hated boys because they were untidy things about the house. We lived in a stiff, cold mansion in Northumberland. I was the only child, and a terrible disappointment because I wanted to be a journalist instead of following my father's profession."

"You make me long to cry," said Margaret. "You poor, poor boy. Tell me some more."

"My second dream? It is only about my work—always to do the very best I possibly can: never to be a slacker, or a rotter, or a waster. My third dream?"

He shrugged his shoulders and laughed. "It's something like yours. Love, and a home, and a child."

He had never spoken like this in his life; until this moment he had not known it was true, and he looked down at Mrs. Stair, half expecting to find her embarrassed.

But she was not so in the least. She was looking at him in entire agreement.

"Love, and a home, and a child," she echoed.

Then her mood changed with the extraordinary swiftness he had noticed in her before.

She jumped to her feet, the pathos vanished from her lovely face. She stood in front of him, smiling. Her large dark eyes, which Inskip had often mentally compared to tortoiseshell, looked down at him, and they held nothing but sweetness and fun.

"Cheer up, Hughie," she said. "And cheer up, Margaret."

Mrs. Stair had called Inskip Hughie for some time, the first occasion being when he had rescued her little dog from a fight in Bond Street. He had not yet grown quite used to it, but he was certain that he liked it very much, and he could not possibly imagine her calling him "Mr. Inskip."

"Tell me about your work," she said. "Work is infinitely more satisfying than the stuff dreams are made of. Work fills you up till you're fat and stodgy with it. Dreams for ever leave you hungry."

Inskip glanced at Margaret's *svelte* and graceful figure, and laughed involuntarily.

"One can be fat and stodgy then, thank Heaven! without showing it," he said.

"An actress," said Margaret, "learns to be everything without showing it."

And again Inskip saw the shadow fall across her face. He wondered for a moment what really was happening just then in the girl's life—whether she were enduring the anguish of the dread of losing her boy-lover, whether something else were crying within her for satisfaction, or whether—her dress were uncomfortable.

It was always so difficult to tell with a woman where her soul ended, and her body began. Inskip had given up the task of solving that problem years ago, but it was one which held for him a never-ending fascination. He always meant—some day—to write a book that should edit the extraordinary versatility of a woman's soul as it never had been edited before. But as the years crept by the profundity, the enormity, and the mystery, of his subject constantly eluded him. How could one do justice to such miraculous creatures?

"Tell me about your work," said Mrs. Stair. "How is my comedy getting on?"

Inskip rose abruptly from his chair, and began to pace up and down the room.

"It's worrying the life out of me. I can't *realise* it—that is to say, I realise it at the back of my brain; it runs through my veins hotly, feverishly; I see it with my mental eye; I hear your voice as Joan, and it's divinest music; I sit down at my desk with a typewriter . . . and it's all gone."

Margaret looked at him curiously.

"You are too reticent," she said, "too controlled. You have the science of writing and conception at your

finger ends, but you lack that passion which can throw your science away from yourself. You wanted to write a tragedy for me, and I stopped you from even attempting it. It would have been absolutely *cold*. You don't know anything about women."

Inskip, he knew not why, was stung.

"What does it profit a man, if he knows everything there is to know about women and does not know himself?" he asked, hotly.

"Thousands of pounds, probably," retorted Margaret, sitting down at the piano. "He would write the most deliciously amusing play that ever was."

And she began to sing and play chromatic scales for the pleasure of annoying her unhappy guest.

"I *will* get my comedy right," said Inskip, through his teeth. "Or die in the attempt."

"Sol-La-Te-Do," rang the teasing voice as it descended the scale.

Mr. Inskip strode over to the piano, grasped the two lovely hands in one of his strong ones, and closed down the lid.

"It is the one thing too much: anything but scales!" he cried.

"I thought you would like them," said the mocking voice. "Calin: scientific: passionless."

He laughed, but under his laugh was again the stab and the twinge. He had not objected very much to Le Measurier's criticism of him; but when this lovely girl persisted in treating him as if he were a chaste and admirable fossil whose rightful environment was the South Kensington Museum, he felt a real annoyance.

He looked at her again, and she was laughing, too. With a flash of intuitive fancy he suddenly realised how, quite possibly, a woman's light laugh, a glance from the bright amusement of her eye, a shrugged shoulder, might send a man straight down to the nethermost hell—just to show her what a devil he really was.

He went back to his chair by the fire and began to talk, very quietly and soberly, about affairs of the day, until he took his departure.

It was a week afterwards that he again called at the hotel. He had finished the comedy, and, severe critic of his own work though he was, felt certain Mrs. Stair would like it. It had those very qualities which she had declared he could never create. It was bright, it was witty, it was—tender. He had written many things before which had held a deeper meaning and a profounder sincerity, but this little frothy, effervescent, three-act drama was a stroke in an absolutely new direction.

He found Le Measurier in Mrs. Stair's boudoir, but she herself was not there.

"Mrs. Stair has asked me to show the Crown Prince over our printing-rooms," said the editor. "We are going in her car to Hampton Court first. How's the comedy?"

"Finished, and satisfactory, thank Heaven!" said Inskip.

"You're a lucky boy after all," said Le Measurier. "You've got what you wanted, and you've got it in your own way. When you're middle-aged and look

back—grisly process!—you won't wish half your writings had been drowned before they were born."

They stood together on the balcony overlooking the river until they heard a sound behind them, and a *riante*, teasing voice sang up a scale:

"Sol—la—te—do. Good afternoon, Hughie."

Inskip turned round, and had hard work for the moment to keep his head.

He had never seen anything so beautiful as Margaret Stair that afternoon. She was dressed for motoring, and yet with the extravagance of the stage. She wore a long coat of ruby velvet with a deep sable collar. The coat was lined with sable, and seemed to be held together only by one large button—a thing of beauty, made of exquisitely-chased dull silver with tiny mediæval figures carved upon it and a ruby in its centre. On the girl's soft dark hair was a little sable cap fastened under her chin with a ruby velvet strap—very like the strap of a policeman's helmet. Her eyes, usually the colour of tortoiseshell, were now almost black, and in their depths was a wonderful happiness. The faintest flush was on her cheeks. She looked the incarnation of joy.

The man gazing at her had to remind himself very insistently that she was about to go for a drive with her lover, or there is no knowing whither his thoughts might not have led him.

Le Measurier was attacking the coat in his practical Scotch fashion.

"Beautiful—but unsuitable," said he. "It will catch all the dust."

"I don't care in the very least if it does," said Mrs.

Stair. "Hughie, dear boy, *do* look at me. What do you think of me? Why do you stare at the river like that?"

"I was watching that barge," said poor Hugh. "It seems to me overloaded."

Mrs. Stair turned to Le Measurier with one of her pretty, protesting gestures.

"One of you thinks me a dust-trap; and the other thinks of an overloaded barge. It is a good thing I have a mirror in my bedroom."

The door swung open. Margaret stopped abruptly in her next sentence. Inskip, his eyes no longer watching the barge (which was quite empty), watched her.

The girl's face was transfigured. The most exquisite and divinest of lights was irradiating the dark eyes. Her mouth was parted; her breath came quickly; and Inskip saw her lovely hands clasped together convulsively for a second.

Then she turned to him.

"Here's the Prince. Good-bye, Hughie. Come along, Sandy."

The men bowed to the tall, good-looking stripling who entered. They both watched involuntarily the greeting between the boy and the girl.

Margaret held out her hand. Her royal lover kissed it in the foreign way. And while he held it, and while he kissed it, they looked into other's eyes for a long minute. . . .

Inskip turned away.

CHAPTER VI

INSKIP dined at his club that night. He had quite recovered from the fleeting discomfort caused by the sight of that cruelly-overloaded barge; the early evening mail had brought him a request from a great American magazine for a serial to start at the beginning of the year—now three months away; he had the idea simmering in his brain already and was happy over it. The comedy, too, was a delightful remembrance to him. He felt certain it would appeal to Margaret, whose sense of proportion and of humour was as keen as his own. He had left the manuscript on her table at the Savoy. She might be reading it, even now.

He finished his dinner leisurely, smoked a cigar in placid contentment, and then strolled towards the reading-room.

As he crossed the quietly luxurious hall he noticed a little crowd of men gathered round the tape-machine.

There was a great labour dispute agitating the whole of England at that moment, and a settlement was hourly expected. Inskip imagined it had been arrived at since the last editions, and crossed over to read for himself. It was then he noticed that, one by one, with shocked and horrified faces, men were turning away: some with tears in their eyes—sudden, painful tears that may come to even a hard-headed man in moments of intensest and dramatically-sudden grief.

"Poor old Sandy," he heard one of them say. "He was a white man, if ever there was one. Who's to tell his wife? And there is to be another kid in a week or two."

Inskip pushed his way through the three or four men who still crowded round the tape-machine, and read for himself. For the moment he simply *read*. He could realise neither the actuality nor the terrible significance of the words on those long paper slips.

"Terrible motor-car fatality.

"An accident resulting in the death of one of the occupants of a large Limousine car occurred on Putney Bridge late this afternoon. The car, which was owned and driven by the Crown Prince Alexis of Poland, collided with a motor-omnibus, owing to a failure on the part of the Prince to apply his brake. The other occupants of the car were Mr. Alexander Le Measurier, the well-known and popular editor of the *Critic*, who, we regret to say, was thrown on his head—dying instantly; and Mrs. Stair, the famous actress. Mrs. Stair is now lying in a nursing-home in the Fulham Road, where she was conveyed as quickly as possible. Her injuries cannot yet be diagnosed, but it is feared her spine has been seriously affected. The Crown Prince of Poland escaped with a slightly sprained wrist."

Inskip stood rooted to the spot, assimilating the full horror of the story. He could not realise it even then. The other men talking in shocked whispers near him could hardly realise it either; but he, himself, had been chatting bright inanities to the dead man only two hours ago. . . .

Sandy Le Measurier—the jolly good fellow—the life of his club—the youngest editor in London, and the shrewdest—the man who had not one single enemy—Le Measurier *dead*.

Inskip left the hall abruptly, and turned into the crowded Strand.

He wandered aimlessly along, craving solitude, his brain refusing to show him the quickest way to find it, until, half-unconsciously, he passed between two streams of traffic and turned down Arundel Street to the Embankment.

The river was at full tide, and gleamed as with a thousand old-world jewels under the gentle moonlight. Inskip leaned over the parapet and watched it. Its placid and horrible serenity seemed to mock him and his sorrow.

He had never owned before, even to himself, quite how large a part Le Measurier had played in his life since that night, six years ago now, when, as a mere raw recruit, he had arrived at the *Critic* office, all nerves and uncertainties, and Le Measurier had given him a shake of the hand and one of his wide, jolly smiles, and had told him to buck up and not look so frightened.

From that day, if ever he had any difficulty, he had only to go to his editor, and Le Measurier, tired, bothered, and weary as he often was, would always help him if he could. And his advice had invariably been entirely disinterested, as Inskip very well knew. Le Measurier had helped him to free himself from the thralldom of newspaper life, even though by so doing he lost an able and a conscientious correspondent.

The river flowed past him, sinister, monotonous.

Inskip shuddered as he watched it. It made him think of the bleak and wan vacancy in his life—his life which seemed suddenly to have been unwound by some gigantic, inhuman hand. He thought of his future—friendless amidst the cold brightness of his career. He thought of the plays he would write, and the books; of the applause and the approbation; and of the emptiness of it all.

And then—he never knew how it came, or why—something rose up within him as mighty as the river that flowed at his feet, and as overwhelming. It struck first at his brain, and smote it as with fire, and then it burnt and scorched at his heart, filling every vein of his manhood with a new, hot desire. It was the vehement cry of a passion that had been suppressed too long.

Inskip looked again at the river, and then up at the enigmatic sky, and spoke. "Happiness I must—I *will* find you."

It was not till Hugh had wandered, blind and despairing, up and down the Embankment for more than an hour that he remembered that another, and perhaps even a greater, tragedy than that of his dead friend, had been caused by the accident on Putney Bridge.

He called in at the office of the *Critic*, in a side lane off Fleet Street, on his homeward way. Everything was in wild confusion. Le Measurier's obituary, which of course had been prepared ever since he became the editor of that important journal, was found to be deficient in two or three essential details. Mrs.

Le Measurier was in no state to be approached on the matter. Inskip came to the rescue and supplied the facts himself. As he was the dead man's most intimate friend, his authority was accepted unquestioningly.

He asked if anything more had been heard of the injuries to Mrs. Stair, and was told that enquiries at the nursing-home had elicited the information that she was still suffering from shock, and that it probably would be two or three days before she would be able to be examined under the X-rays.

As he left the room he saw the chief sub-editor reading a Reuter's telegram, annotating and correcting it in the usual way. As Inskip passed he held it out to him.

"Misfortune cometh not singly," he said.

Inskip glanced at the slip. It conveyed to him nothing at the moment.

"The King of Poland died from heart failure at five o'clock this afternoon."

Le Measurier's funeral was attended by nearly everyone in Fleet Street, and by a great many others outside. The coffin was a whitened sepulchre of enormous wreaths; wreaths filled ten of the gloom-decked coaches that crawled, like evil, sinister monsters, after it. Inskip, his soul in revolt at the whole affair, attended out of respect. He remembered, with a twinge of passionate irony, that Le Measurier had once said to him: "When I die bury me at sea, and have no bally fuss about it!" He looked at the seething crowds of black-coated men,

and, again with a twinge of irony, remembered that Le Measurier, if he could see, would probably remark it was a good story and might run to two columns.

He left London that night, and went for a month's walking-tour in Brittany. On his return to town he took up his work again much as before. His life, apparently, was to be without a friend and without love. He acquiesced, in a sort of grim apathy, with both facts.

He had put so much passion into his career, had striven so strenuously and so conscientiously to work up the high lights of the picture he was making of his life, that he had got the values and the focus all wrong. Sometimes, sitting alone in his flat, he wondered if other men ever had this craving for something—they knew not what. It was not the sort of question one could go up and down Fleet Street asking, unfortunately. Inskip answered it for himself by coming to the conclusion that there were some men born to have an unhappy trick with destiny—the knack of missing things. And that he was one of those men.

As he went out again to his club, and took up his work, he heard that Mrs. Stair was still suffering from some injury to her back, and that all her stage engagements were cancelled for many months to come.

The papers also gave long and gorgeous accounts of the arriving of the new King of Poland in his capital, and hinted that his betrothal to his cousin, one of the Würtemberg princesses, was only a matter of time.

Inskip, when he read this interesting information, was eating his breakfast. He rose from the table,

pushed back his chair, and stood by his open window, looking out on the dark little court. He had had a shock, sharp and swift, when Le Measurier's death had first penetrated to his consciousness; but the curious, heart-sickening, heart-numbing pain that swept across him at the moment he read the paper was different—it touched something within him that was intensely, passionately *human*.

He could not forget, he knew he never would forget, that little unrehearsed scene in the theatre between the boy and the girl; he could not forget, and he knew he would remember to his dying day, the joy and the radiance in Margaret's dark eyes on the afternoon he last saw her. It was revealing and it was annihilating. It had annihilated, once and for all, in his mind the sordidness surrounding the Savoy suite, the sables and the rubies; it had revealed a girl whose day-dream was like his own, "*love, a home, and a child*"; it had made, in his eyes at any rate, an unhallowed love holy.

And now? What was happening to the girl now? In what dark valley were her little feet treading? What, now, was life giving her to hold in her beautiful, tragic hands?

He had a sudden great desire to see her; an almost boyish desire to "cheer her up"; but his inherent reserve and distaste for pushing himself forward curbed it. To go to Mrs. Stair just then seemed to him not only a foolish but a fatuous adventure.

He put the idea from him, but it returned again at night. He played with it for two days, then he decided, quite suddenly, to call at the flat in Shaftes-

bury Avenue where he heard Margaret now was living.

He was shown into a little ante-room while the maid enquired of her mistress if he were to be admitted further. She returned in a minute.

"Mrs. Stair will be pleased to see you, sir."

The room into which Inskip was conducted was darkened artificially by gold-coloured curtains, which were drawn across the window until they met. The sun, brilliant outside that late September afternoon, streamed softly through the gold brocade, and made a pool of golden water on the polished floor. There were yellow flowers in yellow bowls wherever the eye might rest. Inskip's second, impersonal self noticed these things as he crossed the floor. His real and vital consciousness had been projected, the moment he passed the threshold, to a long, low couch drawn up by the fire. He did not look at—but before he reached—it he could have drawn with passionate sincerity a picture, accurate in every detail, of the woman who lay upon it.

She was motionless; her head the same level as her body, unraised by pillows. A silk rug was flung across her, but she had evidently stirred restlessly and disarranged it, for it sprawled on the floor on the side of her couch, and one little foot, in a bronze, heelless slipper, lay exposed.

Suddenly Inskip had a mad desire to kneel down and take that little foot in his two strong hands and kiss it—not from passion, but from pain.

Her hands were hanging listlessly by her side.

She raised one to him as he came near. Then he saw her eyes. . . .

And then he drank of the tragedy of it, and was saturated to his soul.

"It is very kind of you to come to see me, Hughie," she said.

"I simply couldn't keep away," Inskip replied. "I know I'm a clumsy brute in a sick room, and I was afraid I might be *de trop*, or I would have come sooner."

"Do you want to know how I am?" she asked. Her voice now was defiant, listless, sad, but there was a ring of pride in it, too. It was as if she were challenging the Fate that had crushed her to the ground.

"God knows I do," said Inskip, "and yet I dare not ask."

She turned her head with some difficulty, and he saw her body wince with pain.

"I shall be like this for two years . . . and a cripple always," said Margaret.

The man caught his breath, and for a moment the room round him whirled to and fro. The yellow flowers, the golden curtains, Margaret's couch, seemed to be having a desperate race. Then his eyes grew clear once more.

Margaret was smiling at him with a touch of the old humour.

"Poor old Hughie, do you feel like that?"

"I feel," said Inskip, "more profoundly pitiful than I have ever felt in my life before. Fate is *damnable*—*damnable*—*damnable*!"

"Damnable," said Margaret.

Her voice had none of the violence of Inskip's, but in its tones was a terrible bitterness. He met her eyes.

"I have lost *everything*," she said.

He took her hand and kissed it. It seemed an idiotic thing for him to do, and he half feared she might resent it, but he wanted so desperately to show her that he was nearly driven wild with the tragedy of it.

"I have lost *everything*," Margaret said again. "Do you remember my dream, Hughie?"

"Yes," he said, "I remember it."

"I shall never have 'my love and my child and my home' now."

"Things——" began poor Inskip, "things," he continued lamely, "have a wonderful knack of adjusting themselves."

"Not for me," said Margaret, "or for you either, I fancy. Things are adjusting only to the adjustable. I wanted too much of life—*too much*," she added with a touch of passion in her voice.

Inskip looked down on the hand he was holding.

"The first time I saw this," he said, "I thought it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen—but that it was made for tragedy."

"It has fulfilled its destiny," said Margaret.

He took up the other one and held them both.

"Look here," he said, "I mean to come to see you often, and we will talk of brighter things, but with all my heart and soul and strength I say this:

"You are lying there, your beautiful body tortured,

your life, as you say, a tragedy, but, before God, I envy you for some things—and so would most men. You've had almost the best that life can give you. You have remembrances of great joys—the greatest of all joys. What has happened is beyond words cruel, but it is not so cruel as it might have been. My poor, poor little girl, you may think me a prating fool when I say it might have been infinitely, infinitely worse."

He left her shortly afterwards; and at his heart, beneath the pity—the intolerable pity he felt for her, was an absolute conviction that his words had been true

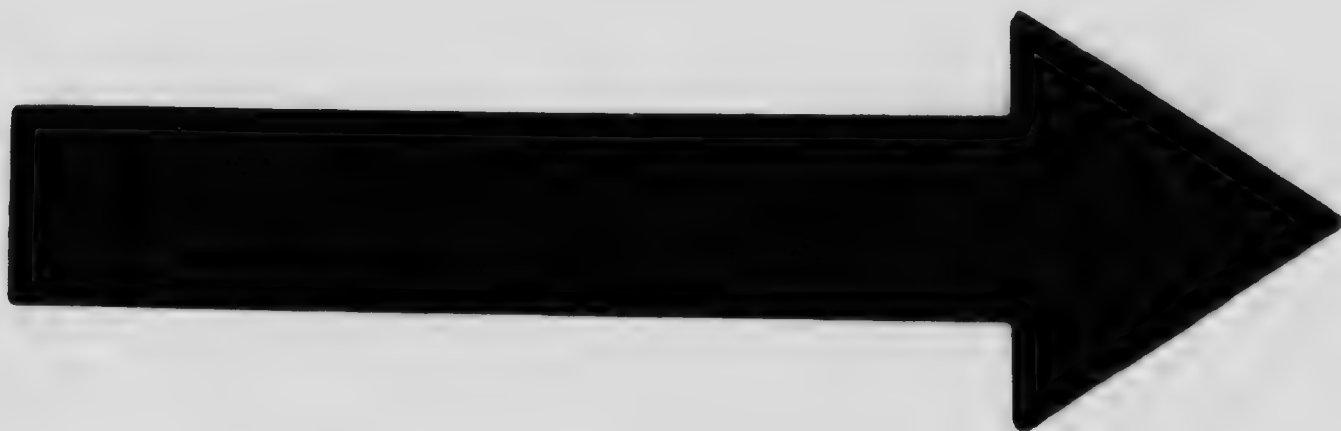
Margaret was suffering in hell now; but at least she had been in heaven. She had *lived*.

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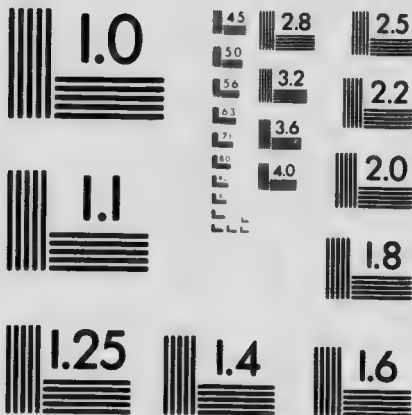
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PART II—IRIS



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CHAPTER I

FROM a bower of turnips, onions, carrots, and grapes, the Honourable and Reverend Paul Davenant's scholarly face looked with grave, unseeing eyes upon his crowded congregation. At the foot of the pulpit was a little sucking-pig in a crate—he could hear its hoarse snuffle quite distinctly. Above his head depended an unevenly-made cross of wilted evergreens; one glance at its construction had told him it was the work of his daughter Iris. "I hope it will fall on the pig, and not on me," he had murmured to himself, before he knelt for the customary prayer.

As he stood up again, his fine lawn sleeve caught on a prickly mass of gelatinous brambles which outlined the small reading-desk upon which was placed his sermon. He gravely released himself. "Harvest decorations," he began, in his gentle, cultured voice, "what exquisite memories, what unspeakably sacred associations do they not bring back to each and to all of us?"

His congregation composed itself into a rapt attention. Mr. Davenant was not usually so understandable. They were, in a measure, proud of their courtly-mannered rector; a little in awe of his gently courteous smile; but, as a preacher, they found him utterly and entirely fantastic. Who but he, thought

they, would drag the stars into every one of his discourses; who else would preach on the mystery of the clouds on Christmas Day; or on railway strikes on the Whitsun festival; and even this evening, on the greatest occasion of all, with that lovely pulpit before his eyes, and Giles Broadwood's little prize pig beneath them, he was gradually, but definitely, drifting into a world whither they could not follow him.

". . . Perhaps, some day," said the old man, gently, his white hair brushed by the cross his daughter had made, "this eternal strife between the Brain and the Spirit will end."

("The brain and the spirit," thought the pig's owner, impatiently, "he means the flesh and the spirit, of course.")

"Imagination . . . that curse which God has laid on His finest souls. . . ."

Iris Davenant turned her head for one moment, and raised her eyes to her father's face. At the same moment Godfrey Hilyard leaned forward from his seat in the side aisle and watched her delicate profile, with its faint wild-rose flush. He liked to think he knew what was passing in the girl's brain, bringing a certain sadness into a countenance which was indefinite in spite of its subtle charm.

"Until the priest puts off his intellectual vestments, and dons a mental mufti," Mr. Davenant continued, "he will be incapable of touching the heart of the twentieth-century layman." (He had, by accident, turned over two pages.)

Iris's face had recovered its mask of a gentle immobility. She was seated between a group of small

boys fresh from Sunday school, and was apparently unaware of, or disinterested in the game of oughts and crosses which most of them were playing on the backs of their hymn-books. It was this little touch of the unusual which had drawn Godfrey Hilyard's admiring attention that evening. It was, he thought, refreshing in the extreme to find a teacher who so evidently disliked teaching. Then he yawned, and settled himself into slumber, for he had been partridge-shooting all the previous day, and was a-weary.

Afterwards he strolled across to the rectory with his mother, it being their invariable custom to have supper with the Davenants on Sunday evenings. Godfrey always enjoyed these remarkable meals, finding Iris the *sauce piquante* to every dish, so that solid blanc-manges and backboneless jellies were each disguised in a subtle flavour. He liked watching Mr. Ponsonby, the curate, and poking mild fun at that very ecclesiastical young man, and he had a warm admiration for the dreamy old rector who was so curiously out of place in the modern priesthood. But, above all, it interested him to watch Iris in her white dress, with her half-awakened face.

"We had forty communicants this morning," said Mr. Ponsonby, devouring cold roast beef, "five rails' full. Last Sunday there were only twenty-nine—a lamentable state of things, but the weather had probably something to do with it."

"The weather's rotten," said Hilyard, "and my turnips are all diseased. I wish you'd put up a prayer for them, Ponsonby."

"Iris," said Mrs. Hilyard, "my dear child, I do not mean to be impertinent, but may I give you a recipe for lemon-sponge?"

"I made that," the old rector interpolated. "It happened this way. Yesterday morning I was in the library, preparing my harvest sermon, when the beautiful smell of lemons came through my window. I—I was not getting on very well with my address, so I followed that enchanting will o' the wisp, and it led me out of the window, and along the verandah, to the kitchen. There I found Iris cutting up fresh lemons. Under her directions I made this pudding."

"*What* a couple!" thought Mr. Ponsonby, compressing his already firmly-closed lips.

("And when the dear old man got back," Godfrey said to himself, "he had forgotten all about his harvest festival, and finished up his sermon according to his own fancy. Bless him! Bless 'em both!) I want some more, please," he added aloud, and passed his plate.

"A pudding made by Iris and her father!" thought Mrs. Hilyard to herself. "I only hope he may escape with nothing worse than a nightmare."

"Thirteen of the domestics of the Hall were in the gallery, I observed," said Mr. Ponsonby. "Did you notice that tall young footman, Mis Siris?"

"I noticed nobody," the girl answered curtly—a curtness to which the curate was quite accustomed, and of which he took small heed, privately considering his rector's daughter rather "wanting." (Had she not turned on him one Sunday morning in a quivering rage—"Please do not call me Mis Siris!" "Then

what *am* I to call you?" he had enquired. To which she had given the baffling reply, "Miss Iris, if you must." "Why, that is what I *do* say, Mis Siris," he had answered, patiently.)

"He was behaving most impertinently. He was grimacing until his face fell exactly into the lines of Saul in the window of the north chapel."

"I always thought Saul in that window was a girl—and a jolly handsome girl, too," said Mr. Hilyard.

"The man did this with the deliberate intention of amusing the under-housemaid. She giggled incessantly."

The old rector gently murmured, "Youth—youth," and Mr. Ponsonby bit his lip, and coloured angrily. Iris closed her eyes, and Godfrey saw she was breathing quickly. It seemed as if the atmosphere of the room were stifling her. He would have opened more windows were it not that he had seen the very same action of hers on winter Sunday nights.

"So the Hall is tenanted again," Mrs. Hilyard observed. "I thought I saw that witch-like Margaret Stair in the distance yesterday."

"Mrs. Stair's a deuced good-looking woman, in spite of her crutches," Godfrey said. "When Hugh Inskip introduced me last year she was just recovering from typhoid; and, with those wonderful eyes set in haggard cheeks with a wine-like flush, I assure you she made a picture to remember."

"A picture to forget," Mrs. Hilyard corrected. "She has made people talk enough, in all conscience."

"I want to learn to knit," Iris said suddenly. Godfrey, his senses unusually on the alert that evening,

thought, with pride and pleasure, how badly she tried to turn the conversation—and loved her for it. She was, he told himself, so girlish in her white-muslin gown, so entirely and for ever apart from the characteristics of the woman who had been the talk of three counties and the whisper of a fourth.

"Your mother used to knit," murmured the old man at the head of the table, awaking from a reverie. "I can see her now, sitting on a high oak chair, one little white hand controlling the wheel. And I can hear the soft, whirring sound . . . and her voice, sometimes."

"He means *spin*," Mrs. Hilyard confided to her son in a very audible aside. "Elaine Davenant never did a useful thing in her life—and her thread was always breaking."

"Inskip is staying at the Hall, so my landlady informs me," said Mr. Ponsonby, eating his rector's lemon-sponge with a very wry face. "I wonder if I might solicit his help for my boys' Temperance Guild. We want a lecture next week that shall be bright, persuasive, manly: the tone high, yet at the same time merry. Total abstinence can be so treated—if proper pains be taken—that it appears not only beneficial to the body, but exhilarating and refreshing to the mind."

"Inskip's your man! *Ask* him," said Godfrey with a grin.

"Mr. Rinskip has an unfortunate manner," the curate murmured to himself, "but I feel he must be good at bottom. Properly approached he might—who knows?—be a tower of strength. There must

be a fine element in a man who is so kind to a cripple."

"If you mean Margaret Stair," Godfrey interpolated, "she fascinates him."

"How *can* a hopeless invalid fascinate?" Mr. Ponsonby put down his spoon, and assumed a man-of-the-world air. "The very thesis of attraction is perfect health. *Mens sana in corpore sano.*" He himself took a cold bath twice a day, and had a secret contempt for his old rector who loved hot water, and hot towels, and sunshine.

"If you'd ever seen Margaret Stair act," Godfrey said, "you'd not talk rot. . . . by *Gad!*"

Iris turned an awakened face and shining eyes on him. "Tell me about it," she begged.

"I saw her as Juliet seven years ago. I tell you, she looked the incarnation of that unforgettable, unrepeatable moment when passion meets innocence." (Mr. Ponsonby stiffened his back, and stared in surprise at his outspoken *vis-à-vis*). "I saw her two nights after as Lady Macbeth . . . years older, tinged through and through with guilt and lust, her very fingers itching to murder. It was genius-clear, pellucid genius."

"I have been to a theatre once, and once only," Mr. Ponsonby interposed hastily. He had been watching Iris's face, and thought it advisable to direct the conversation into a healthier channel. "I went to see 'Our Boys.' I—I was presented by the management with a ticket. It thought, and very rightly, that the presence of the cloth would have an encouraging effect on the company, and an elevating one on the

audience. But I felt that, with my nature, the theatre was an absolute danger, and before the conclusion of the third act I left."

"Let us go out into the garden," Paul Davenant said suddenly. "The harvest moon will be full to-night."

The long white house, seen from the bottom of the lawn, had a curious, unearthly appearance. It seemed to swim, like a stately ship, on a dark and brooding sea. The moonlight, now golden, now silvern, fell softly on its chimneys and on its windows, and the swaying trees cast swaying shadows over the sloping roof. Godfrey Hilyard, the least subtle-minded, and most matter-of-fact of men, felt himself insensibly influenced by the mystery of night. He became unusually silent.

Iris's father had disappeared, and it was with small surprise that Godfrey noted the fact; for Mr. Ponsonby's soul-outpourings had been wont, Sunday after Sunday, to inspire his rector with sudden cravings after even less attractive phenomena than a harvest moon.

In the distance, between tall raspberry-canecanes, could be seen the trim head and upright carriage of Mrs. Hilyard, and behind her—this mode of procedure rendered compulsory by the narrowness of the path—the square flat back, and high white collar of Charles Edward Ponsonby, M.A. The former was voicing her disapproval of the mossy, weed-grown paths. The latter was still planning the Temperance meeting to be held next week.

"I shall ask Mr. Rinskip myself—I shan't leave it to Davenant. Davenant is too easily cast down. I

never take a refusal," came the clear, ringing tones from amongst the raspberry canes.

"If only Paul Davenant would let me speak to his gardener, I'd have these paths somewhat different in a day," Mrs. Hilyard jerked over her shoulder. "But what can I do when he tells me he thinks weeds are more attractive than gravel?"

Godfrey Hilyard broke the long silence which had prevailed between himself and his companion. He turned to her; his lazy, good-tempered face twisted into a somewhat irritable frown.

"Aren't curate——?" he was beginning; and then stopped abruptly. The girl's mouth was distorted by an almost superhuman effort of self-control. It looked to the startled man as though ten thousand devils were being kept in check—and with difficulty—under the cloak of a gentle nun.

"Iris!" he cried, involuntarily. "What, in the name of——?" He stopped, for she had caught his hand and gripped it hard.

"Oh, if you only knew—if you only knew——" he had to stoop to catch the words.

"Knew what?"

"Knew me."

The moonlight, most embarrassing of chaperons, fell with disconcerting brilliancy on the little path where the two had halted. Mr. Hilyard, with one eye on the Temperance advocate, and another on his mother, put out a big brown hand, and gently pulled the girl towards a small plantation.

"There's nothing on earth," he said, when they were sheltered by a friendly bush, "nothing on earth I

should like so much as to know you. Introduce yourself."

"Ah, don't *laugh!*" the girl cried, and it was like the moan of a wounded animal. Godfrey turned, caught her hands in his, and drew her towards him.

"This beastly weather is enough to upset people much stronger than you," he said, patting her hand gently. "You've got the blues; and there isn't anything in the world so bad as a Sunday night for them." (To himself he muttered: "If Iris Davenant can't be stopped from making lemon-sponges, she must, at any cost, be prevented from eating 'em afterwards.")

"If you only knew," said the girl, "how I loathed my life."

"There—there," said the young man, "there—there." And he patted her hand with even greater kindness than before. Indeed, he was genuinely startled at finding such passion in so much white muslin.

"How I loathe the church and the school, the good little story-books, Mr. Ponsonby and his Temperance Guild, and all the rest."

"Poor old Iris!" said the young man. "It is a shame."

"Even the school-children behave worse with me than with anyone else. They know I can't manage them, and they take advantage of me."

"If any of the darned brats is cheeky to you," Mr. Hilyard interpolated, savagely, "you send for me, and I'll spank it within an inch of its life."

"You would only enrage its mother, and she would come here and storm at me. They come and storm

now, when I try to make the school lessons picturesque."

Godfrey Hilyard stroked his moustache to hide a smile. Iris's versions of Bible stories were so highly imaginative—indeed, so much an improvement on the "Arabian Nights"—that many mothers had broken out in open rebellion against them and her.

He looked down at the girl. The gentle witchery of her face stole around and about him until he was entirely encompassed by it; and the old sane, sensible world that he knew so well—the world that held model farms and model wives and mothers, the world that held health without nerves, and contentment without desire, became suddenly insipid and colourless to him.

He realised just then, and perhaps for the first time, what a glorious, romantic, kaleidoscopic world there was beyond the brown sobriety of his own ploughed fields, or the grey nakedness of the steel-black moors behind them. Iris, whom he loved with a terrible faithfulness, and an equally terrible unimaginativeness, was a citizen of the one, living in exile in the other. For a brief moment he understood, with a flash of devastating intuition, the real and essential difference between them. They were of the same colour—but they were not of the same race.

He knew now that that had been her greatest attraction for him, even back in the days of their common childhood. Iris, as a schoolgirl with fair pigtails, had seen visions. Godfrey, home from Oxford and ripe for romance, had seen—her. He had loved her gentle vagueness; the curiously aloof manner that was wrapped around her like a garment—a manner

that made impossible any attempt at a flirtation; her thoughtful way of regarding him with dreamy grey eyes, as though he were a problem—but not a sex problem.

Before he returned to Oxford for his last term he asked her, with a rather rueful laugh, if he might have a lock of her hair. He told her it was the "thing"—that a fellow always liked to have that sort of remembrance of a girl-chum when he was away from home.

She gave him one of her most casual looks, took up a pair of gardening-scissors with which she had been shearing dead geranium leaves, and hacked off a thick end from one of her long plaits.

"Here it is," she said; "how strange men are."

Then she regarded her other plait with some dismay.

"It is four inches too short," she said. "You had better have that, too."

And she immediately denuded herself of another four inches.

Godfrey marched home with his handful of hair, feeling more like a barber than a lover.

And yet in a way, and after a peculiar fashion, they were comrades. Godfrey told Miss Davenant of his plans for his tenants' cottages, each with its bathroom (alas! these wicked people often stored their coals in it), and each with its little garden (where they kept their pigs and hens). Miss Davenant in her turn played Gregorian chants to him upon the organ in church, and related to him many anecdotes in the careers of geniuses who had never been understood in their lifetime—such as Shelley, Keats, and two or three others of the same ilk. Godfrey thought she

had the sweetest, most sympathetic nature in the world.

When they were both much younger she had told him more wonderful things still.

He was a healthy, jolly little schoolboy, and Iris a quaintly dignified maiden of seven when he found her on the rectory lawn one morning, weeping gently to herself, her small face hidden in her hands, a fair pig-tail depending from each shoulder.

"I have killed a baby," she said. "I pushed him out of his go-cart into the pond. And now I am a murderess."

Godfrey, immensely horrified, flung off his coat and waistcoat, unlaced his boots with the greatest possible haste, and then rushed towards the pond, intent on rescue.

Certainly Iris did try to stop him as he reached the edge—an action which Mr. Hilyard always remembered to her credit.

"It was a long while ago," she said, "he will be sunk and deaded by now. Don't you go in, Godfrey, you'll catch a cold."

Such reasoning had small effect on our hero. He swam vigorously about the large and very dangerous pond in the rectory meadow; he investigated most thoroughly a clump of luxuriously-growing water weeds at its furthest edge, where, he thought, the hapless infant might have been entangled, and he sounded with a very long stick the water where it was shallow.

But he found no baby, and reluctantly returned to shore.

Iris was still weeping—a disconsolate and pitiable little figure. Godfrey, horribly wet and uncomfortable though he was, proceeded to comfort her.

"Cheer up, old girl," he said, "such things will happen, you know. But I think we'd better go and tell somebody."

Little Miss Davenant uttered a shrill scream of dismay.

"You must never, never tell nobody," she cried. "It must be our secret. If you betray me, the police would have me hanged."

Which reasoning was altogether too much for the kind-hearted boy. The thought of his beloved play-fellow in the stern arms of the law was more than he could bear. He promised, with a sacred oath, that her secret should be his. The only criticism of her conduct that passed his lips was what perhaps under the circumstances was a very natural question.

"What made you do it, dear?" he asked.

Little Iris's motive for her drastic procedure was quite clear to herself, at any rate. She replied with delightful candour.

"He was an ugly baby—drefful ugly. And his nose was very dirty."

"Oh, I say," said Godfrey, "you know, darling, you mustn't do things like that. The poor little beggar couldn't help it."

Then, as his teeth were chattering, and he was terribly cold, he ran home to change.

That baby was never found, and, stranger still, it was never enquired for. Godfrey, his guilty secret pressing about his heart with cold and clammy fingers,

lived miserably for over a week, fearing discovery, not for himself, but for his dear little chum.

She took the matter lightly the next day. He was amazed at her courage.

And then, with extraordinary suddenness, the explanation dawned upon him.

Now Godfrey was even less psychologically-minded than the average schoolboy, and it therefore was an amazing thing that, in one startling flash, the whole science of the imagination was revealed to him. At the time, of course, he did not understand the amazingness of it, but in after years, looking back, he realised one great fact—one of the few great facts that really matters—that love, like lightning, will teach you in a minute what wisdom, with its stone-cutting processes, would not do in a year.

He grew accustomed, after that, to the many wonderful things that happened under the rectory walls. Iris, it is true, gave up infanticide as a pastime, but it might well have been because there were so many more interesting things to do.

For weeks she kept a burglar in the coal-cellar, feeding him at regular intervals with succulent morsels from her own and Godfrey's larder. Then her father, kind, white-haired old man though he looked, took to beating her—a fact that would have driven Godfrey to murder but for his newly-found psychology. Next, a little sister of hers, nearly starved to death, was discovered in a locked-up attic.

Godfrey lived through it all with her, and yet he had his almost divine understanding as well. It was not an entirely supernatural comprehension, for he lost

sight of one very significant fact—the fact that little Iris herself was the chief factor in all her romances, either as a rescuer of the persecuted, or as the persecuted herself.

But as the years passed they cleared his somewhat dimmed vision, and he saw even that as well. It made not the slightest difference in his affection for her. Iris's imagination was a very great part of her, but it was not her most characteristic part, thought the young man who loved her. Her most characteristic part was so lovely and so perfect a thing that he hugged it to his own imagination as a divinest secret.

The result of it all, however, was sadly disappointing to him.

Nobody understood Iris Davenant as she really was so well as young Hilyard; no one understood Iris as she imagined herself less. So poor Godfrey, living in his real, vital, essential world, got stones where he craved for bread, and dreams where he wanted flesh and blood. And Iris—Iris halo-encircled, in her own heroic world, had, as her sole companion of the other sex, a man whom she considered a dear, hopelessly-prosaic stupid-head.

The prosaic stupid-head was now looking down at her very kindly.

"You come with me for a long walk on the moors to-morrow. It will do you a world of good."

"I hate long walks on the moors——"

He stared at her—involuntarily.

"——in the daytime," the girl added, defiantly. Then she broke away from the hand that was resting kindly on her shoulder. "Go and tell your mother it

is getting too damp for her to be out of doors. Take her home—and leave me to myself.”

“Iris, you’re no end of a pig!”

But he spoke to the Night Wind, and to the Moonshine, for the girl had left him abruptly, and he could see her white frock disappearing rapidly in the murky shadows at the bottom of the garden.

CHAPTER II

AS Hugh Inskip strode quickly over the moors the moon cast a coppery glow upon the broken shrubs and low stone walls either side of his path. The night breeze was fresh and sharp; Hugh raised his face to it, and drew in deep breaths. He wore no hat, and, in the clear moonlight, his long, thin face, and pointed, closely-trimmed black beard, stood out like a cameo. Something of an inward tumult showed in his tempestuous walk, in the way he carried his shoulders, in the light that burned fitfully in dark eyes that were sometimes cold, and often weary.

His after-dinner talk with Margaret Stair had been singularly exhausting. Her wit had been at its most fascinating—and at its least endurable. Sometimes (and to-night was one of these times) Hugh felt within himself a craving for a friend less subtle, less perilously alluring from the mental standpoint; sometimes (and to-night was again one of those times) he had a very human desire for the steadying chorus of the uninspired.

It was three years since Margaret's terrible accident, but it might have been only three days judging by the poignant, insistent pain it kept alive in Inskip's heart. He could never grow used to the reality of it. Each time when he met her after a lengthy absence abroad

(where a great deal of his time lately had been spent), and saw the beautiful, unchanged face, and the beautiful, unchanged hands, he had the same jarring shock—the same sickening pain. *Margaret* as a cripple . . .

She, herself, had said very little about it since one terrible day in Inskip's life when, paying her one of his frequent visits, he had found her about to take poison. He never forgot the scene that followed as long as he lived, or the ever-present dread he carried about with him for weeks and months afterwards. To Margaret, racked with pain, her nerves torn to shreds, her eyes blinded with the tears shed over the records of the Polish Royal Wedding, death had seemed a friend, coming in the guise of a great and beautiful peace. To Inskip it had seemed the final, most irreparable mistake of her destiny; for, though he belonged to no specified creed, and was out of sympathy with all dogma, he had a wonderful reverence for the Divine Fire of Life. This was a characteristic that grew with his growth. In youth he, perhaps, saw light less often, but in after life certainly more frequently, than did most of his colleagues.

His work was progressing slowly but surely to the goal he had had in view for the last ten years. The goal which, in the words of his day-dream, he had described to Mrs. Stair as the knowledge that he was neither a slacker, a rotter, nor a waster, and that he always put into his writings the best that was in him.

He wrote much on social subjects, but more on art, and most of all did he write temperamental sketches of leading statesmen or actors of the day. His touch for that kind of thing was unerring, and his taste

equalled it (which was an attribute for which politicians greatly blessed him). He never wrote about women if he could possibly avoid it. He said, with gentle suavity, that he could not do them justice.

Women usually adored him because he was extraordinarily good-looking (in that dark, devilish way that women say is so sweet), and extraordinarily unaware of it. They told terrible tales of poor Inskip at their tea-parties, and said he was in love with an Under-Secretary's wife, and that his constant attendance on Mrs. Stair was a great indiscretion for a coming man.

Hugh paid no attention to these rumours, even when they were brought to his immediate notice by well-meaning friends. He continued to write brilliant character sketches of men, he neglected the more brilliant sketches he might have done of their wives, and he went on visiting Mrs. Stair whenever he was in town. Also every autumn he joined her country house-party.

In his successful career he had only had one failure—but it was a failure which had embittered and minimised every triumph. He had had no answer, yet, to the challenge he had cried out to his destiny as he stood on the Embankment the night of Le Measurier's death. *Happiness, I will, I must find thee.* Never since that tragic night had he even allowed to himself that, at the back of his triumphs, at the back of his brain, and encircling his whole life, was a black and ghastly emptiness. But sometimes, in a wave of cynical fantasy, he thought his life, and his heart, and his soul, were like a great grey bird—and the bird had no wings. At other times, and in a simpler mood, he

recalled words spoken by his dead friend—"There is no tragedy in the world worse than the tragedy of the man who gains everything his brains can fetch him, and who returns to his home with his laurels—and *there's no one there.*"

Inskip had had one or two counterfeits of the real thing in the last three years. Once he had met a young girl during his travels in Russia, with strange eyes—like dark agates—set in a little pointed white face framed in glorious auburn hair. He never could tell how it happened—he had had these moods with less and less frequency of late—but he wanted to take down all that lovely mass of colour, pulling out each hairpin with a feminine, sensitive touch, and then to plunge his hands into it with a fury of masculinity, and drown his face in its red glory, and then kiss it gently, and tenderly; and then again . . . who knows?

But he did none of these beautiful, ecstatic things. Those were the days, alas! when it was considered rather smart to be honest and matter-of-fact about borrowed plumes. Miss Agate-Eyed, weary after much travelling, settled herself full length on her seat, laid her pretty head on a pillow, and composed herself to sleep, having first, for her greater comfort, removed her hat and placed it in the rack, and with it a mysterious little arrangement of glowing puffs mounted on a comb.

Inskip went into the smoking saloon in convulsions of mirth. He had no more troublesome moods that night, was as happy as a sand-boy, and, in his gratitude, helped Miss Agate-Eyed to get her luggage

quickly through the Custom office the following day.

Following this came, in rapid succession, one or two other trifling adventures, consequent, in a far greater extent, of Inskip's holiday mood, his light flippancy, and a touch of the journalistic craving for piquant experience, than of any deeper, or more serious feeling. As was to be expected the pleasure he derived from these little episodes was slight—a touch of excitement (soon subdued) at the colour of some woman's hair or eyes; or a few days' interest in the witty conversation of a girl well-trained in the art of mental suggestiveness. The real Inskip came home as unmoved by the tender passion as he went away.

It was on his first autumn visit to the little moorland village where Mrs. Stair had her country house that Hugh felt, beating against his heart with the wild wings of an imprisoned bird, a desire that afterwards was to become one of the great factors in his development—a desire, at moments, for an absolute and unbroken solitude.

There was nothing morbid about it, for he did not crave to be alone in order to think about himself, his sins, or his soul, as has been the habit of many of the saintly—though unhealthy—hermits of the past. He found, instead, that this artificial loneliness—a loneliness that he could create when he chose and destroy when he willed—had a stimulating, almost intoxicating effect upon his brain. He never, he discovered, wrote with such passion, such sincerity, such originality, as after he had returned from some lengthy,

invigorating, ten-mile tramp over the swarthy moors, and had had the extreme good fortune to escape seeing a single living thing.

It was at times like that that he would sit in Mrs. Stair's beautiful little boudoir, when the whole house was asleep, and create some exquisite, tender jewel of a poem, or write, at white heat, a startlingly arresting story for one of the greater magazines.

The habit, like most habits, grew upon him. When other men sought for excitement in drink, or gambling, or a love affair—Inskip took a ten-mile tramp, arranging his route so carefully that he did not even encounter a lamb. He grew to love Nature with a passion which was the more intense because about it there was nothing exhausting. He did not look upon mountains and seas and suns, as did some of his colleagues, in the light of a valuable asset for journalism, but rather as a sacred possession for his own inner consciousness. He never alluded to these things in his writings, but the great moor, with its desolating grandeur, always typified for him the sad splendour of a world that held no love. And in the air-voices of night's silence he often heard a woman's song—soft and low.

His feet crunched mercilessly over the bracken this evening. Behind him stretched a long and flattened pathway. He carried his dark head high, and the mystery of night, combined with the gentle melancholy of the moonlight, seemed to adorn him with something of the glamour of the hero in a Wagner opera—or so

Iris Davenant thought as she watched him from her vantage point of a small hillock.

She wondered if he would speak to her to-night. Sometimes he did, and sometimes he did not (those were the nights when she cried herself to sleep, sick with wretchedness). On one unforgettable occasion he had turned and walked with her for nearly a mile, and they had spoken twice. As he left her, Inskip had said, "You have the most wonderful, God-given gift of silence of any woman I ever met. You were designed to be the eternal comfort of some weary man with nerves."

And Iris had smiled at him with one of her wonderful smiles—and had said nothing. (For how could she tell him that she was tongue-tied by the lure of the night, and the glamour of his presence?)

He was going to ignore her this evening! That he had seen her she was certain, for his dark and searching eyes had met her own—met her own and chained them for one breathless moment. Then he had flung her aside with a but half-concealed frown, and his pace had quickened. Suddenly the girl moved towards him, swayed by an irresistible impulse. For one night, she determined, she would take the initiative. Often he had summoned her to his side when she had been nervous and afraid of herself—now she would summon him. Which she did—very gracefully; for she had an instinctive and intuitive tactfulness which clothed her least conventional moments. And that she was unconventional—even for a clergyman's daughter—there could be no denying.

She looked up at the stars—and then down at

Inskip. "Will you please tell me which of them is Spika?" she asked.

Hugh Inskip paused in his rapid stride. He expressed no astonishment, and probably felt none.

"Spika is that little twinkly one to the right of Mercury," he replied, and would have passed on with a slight bow, but Miss Davenant's ignorance was yet to be satisfied.

"And which is Mercury?" she asked.

Mr. Inskip looked down with some natural surprise. Mercury was so very obvious—almost as obvious as the light shining in the girl's grey eyes. He smiled at her, and Iris thought him more than ever like a Wagnerian hero.

"What is the matter with you to-night?" he asked.

"I am very wretched," the girl said.

"That," said Mr. Inskip, "is because you will worry yourself about the stars. Take the advice of a hopeless materialist, and think over the excellent dinner you have just consumed."

"It was supper," Iris said, simply.

"A most godless invention," Mr. Inskip said, absently, but his thoughts were evidently wandering from the subject. Iris lifted her delicate little head, and raised her dreamy eyes until they met his.

"Are you a hopeless materialist?" she asked.

He laughed. "So Mrs. Stair has just informed me," he replied.

Miss Davenant turned her eyes towards Mercury for one moment. A sharp stab had entered her heart at her companion's words—or was it at his expression

—the half-tender, half-rueful smile that flashed across his very enigmatical countenance?

"Why did Mrs. Stair call you a hopeless materialist?" she queried, and then stammered confusedly. Would he deem her impertinent? He did not even know her name. Their curious companionship had been sponsored by the night-wind, and fathered by the vast moorland; it had neither the hedgerow of convention nor the wall of introduction to encompass it.

But Mr. Inskip expressed no displeasure. "Mrs. Stair and I have a sparring-match every Sunday evening when she wishes me to accompany her on the organ while she sings, "*Oh for the wings of a dove.*"

They walked on in silence for some considerable time. Mr. Inskip did not slacken his speed in consideration of his gentle companion, and the girl had much ado to keep pace with him. Almost involuntarily a breathless gasp broke from her. The man paused, looked down at her ivory-tinted little oval face, and smiled.

"Little white witch," he said, "do you want to admire Spika again?"

"No," Iris said, sturdily. "I am not tired, if that is what you mean."

"Do you know," said Mr. Inskip, "when I saw you at first to-night I felt I did not—did not want to be bothered."

"Yes—I noticed it."

"And yet you had the impudence——!"

"I—I was so wretched."

He looked at her very kindly. "How are you now?"

"Very happy," said Iris.

"I have a good effect on you then?"

"I—I am afraid of rats and hares on the moors," said Miss Davenant, "and I feel your companionship a protection."

"What a chatterbox you are to-night, white witch! What has come over you?"

"Perhaps I am growing less nervous. This is the sixth walk I have had with you."

"You must never speak to me again," said Mr. Inskip, "unless I first address you. It is a bad habit for you to acquire."

He spoke jestingly, but the girl's instinct was, occasionally, marvellously accurate. She detected a flavour of truth, and relapsed into that profound silence which Mr. Inskip, on a previous occasion, had rewarded with his unqualified approval.

They spoke no further words until they parted at the stone wall where the moor joined the Rectory paddock. Then Iris looked up, smiling.

"Good night," she said, "and pleasant dreams."

"Good-night, most adorable of white witches," said Mr. Inskip, his voice sounding a warmer note than Iris had ever heard.

But he had forgotten her the next moment.

CHAPTER III

IT was chiming ten when Hugh Inskip reached the Hall. The wide door was partly open; he pushed it further, stood for a moment, the handle between his long firm fingers, and looked around him.

Upon the floor of the spacious entrance was a carpet of a curiously vivid shade of peacock blue. Inskip, of whose senses the meaning of colour was a very real—very essential—part, had always been baffled by it. Sometimes the moment his eye fell on it he was enveloped with a feeling of disturbance and unrest—enveloped, as it were, in the Eternal Question of Life. At other moments he was conscious of something serene and strong, something human and pitiful.

On a table near a long window was a large round basket filled with honeysuckle—its pungent odour filled the place. In a cage, hanging high, were three white doves. Down the length of one wall hung a great picture: Sargent's immortal painting of Margaret Stair as Sappho.

The light was dim—burning softly through a gold globe containing myriad candles—yet Inskip could see every detail of the wonderful thing. He stood beneath it and looked up at the beautiful, tragic face; at the glowing scarlet of the exquisitely-shaped mouth; at the dark eyes that seemed to hold all the

answers to all the questions that man has ever asked . . . at the soft, southern colouring of the cheeks, like molten amber and pearls. Margaret was wearing a deep apricot-tinted gown with a curiously embroidered giraffe of gold and palest pink, and on her dark hair was a little fillet of pearls. She stood there—a living thing, insolent in her beauty, defying Fate to harm her. Inskip sighed heavily.

He heard a sound, and turned, alert in a moment. Mrs. Stair was coming slowly along the corridor, leaning on her silver-headed stick, one hand—a beautifully-shaped hand, like Inskip's own—pushing a chair in front of her. She was singing very softly, in her exquisite mezzo. Inskip strained his ears for the words.

"Oh, tender Moon: Oh, Star of Heaven." She caught sight of him, and smiled the somewhat enigmatical smile that was characteristic of her.

"How many miles have you walked, Hughie? I watched you from the garden, and you fled like an avenging Mercury."

He took her stick, pushed the couch close to her, arranged the soft turquoise cushions and the sable rug. She thanked him with another of her smiles, and held his hand in hers for a moment.

"Dear, kind old Hughie. Are you more amiable now?"

"Infinitely. Shall we play 'Oh for the Wings of a Kitten'?"

"I think we had better be quiet. The others have gone to bed. Everyone is going off shooting early to-morrow."

"If we cannot create life," Inskip said, as he stroked his short black beard, and watched Margaret Stair's fingers through half-closed eyes, "we can at least destroy it. And that is the next best thing."

"Hugh, you are a merciless critic."

"If you had seen the almost superhuman glee on Godfrey Hilyard's face yesterday when he shot a wild duck, you might have been tempted, with me, to say it was *the* best thing."

"If you'd ever seen Godfrey Hilyard's expression as he gazes at Miss Davenant, you would know that wild ducks were very second fiddles to him."

Mr. Inskip looked mildly uninterested. "Don't know Miss Davenant even by sight," he said "but Hilyard's a very decent sort."

Mrs. Stair's beautiful eyes gave him one look, gravely contemplative, then she shrugged her shoulders under the sable rug.

"My dear Hughie, you've walked *miles* with Miss Davenant."

Inskip, a little bored by the topic, was watching the soft glow thrown by the candlelight on the burnished copper fender. "Amber, and amethyst, and red," he murmured. "Margaret, half close your eyes, and tell me if you don't see the same."

"I keep my eyes very wide open," said Mrs. Stair. "And that is how I saw you and Miss Davenant just now returning in the moonlight." She suddenly put out an eager hand, caught the man's and pressed it. "*Dear* Hughie," she cried, "nobody is half good enough for you, but you will make some woman divinely unhappy some day. Iris Davenant reminds

me of a wild white rose. And you are rather like an eagle."

"A strangely assorted couple," remarked Mr. Inskip, grimly. His expression showed decided annoyance.

"Why did you not tell me this evening where you were going?" the lovely voice continued teasingly. "When I remember I called you a hopeless materialist, I could weep for shame."

"You are talking the most absurd nonsense."

"My fine black eagle! Is the little white rose *sub rosa*?"

"Margaret, I shall shake you in a second!"

She made him wince, as was always in her power.

"Shake a cripple!"

He was at her feet in a minute, her hand in his.

"*Don't!*" pleaded a totally different Hugh Inskip, a tone in his voice that no woman save her could ever bring. "And don't talk rot!"

"Tell me about the white rose."

"I tell you it was accidental."

"It was the most delicious of accidents; but, as it has repeated itself some two or three times, why not insure against it?"

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"Why go moonlight-sonataing?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"I like Godfrey Hilyard," said Mrs. Stair. "He hates me, I believe, but I like him, nevertheless; and I think if you shot wild-ducks, and left him to gather wild-roses, the scheme of things would be simplified."

"My dear Margaret," said Mr. Inskip, "I see it will be wiser to tell you the entire truth. Until you men-

tioned Miss Davenant's name, I was unaware of it. You know how unconventional I am. We met on the moors one evening and—how do these things happen? She looked, I thought, like a youthful sister of the Madonna. I said, 'Let us walk together out of the world,' or something equally mad. She gave me a look of submission, and understanding, and intelligence (women do these things so marvellously well), and—and we continued our walk together you know."

"And talked about the beauties of Nature—eh?"

"On the contrary, if I remember aright, we spoke not at all."

"Iris Davenant has a marvellous imagination," said Mrs. Stair.

"Imagination in a woman," mused Mr. Inskip, "works very much like vaccine in a man. Either she has it very badly, or she doesn't have it at all. In both cases the latter is the enviable."

"According to that theory Miss Davenant is much to be commiserated," Mrs. Stair replied. "In fact, in any case, imagination is *de trop* in a clergyman's daughter."

"Is she a clergyman's daughter?"

"She is the daughter of the rector of this parish."

For the first time since Mrs. Stair had led the conversation, Inskip showed some faint sign of interest. An expression, half-surprise, half-amusement, flitted across his very unemotional face.

"Are all rectors' daughters like her?" he queried. "Somehow, I don't know how the idea came to me, I imagined them as never less than twenty-five, and very full of their own importance in the scheme of things."

This girl I walked with was charmingly irresolute; a little impalpable, indeterminate, white witch."

"She teaches in the Sunday School," said Mrs. Stair, "and such teaching has never been heard this side of the 'Arabian Nights.' I hear she makes even the befogged progress of the Children of Israel interesting."

"Wonderful!" said Mr. Inskip, now fully aroused.

"Times without number she has brought trouble on herself by her picturesque way of handling Ancient Truths."

"You amaze me!"

"Her father is just the same."

"He could not do better," said Mr. Inskip. "I have never to my knowledge met a rector, but, if he at all resembles this dear little bundle of imagination, I should very much like to know him."

"He has very beautiful ideas which no one understands, and which he does not seem able to explain."

"Why should he? Can you imagine anything more criminal than to explain a beautiful idea? One might as well try to reduce a rainbow to the vulgar fraction of the ribbon-counter."

Mrs. Stair was watching him with kindly eyes, very dark and very amused. "My dear Hughie, don't you know that the craving of all normal hearts is for the well-defined ribbons of life that will wash, and not for that Jack-in-the-Box of a rainbow?"

Inskip laughed.

"And you call *me* a hopeless materialist," said he.

"All the nicest men, and all the horriest women are materialists," said Mrs. Stair.

"Every woman should have ideals," said Inskip. "They keep them from growing stout, and tend to produce that indefinable charm in the eye—you have it yourself, Margaret—that Never-never-Land that for ever cries to poor helpless man 'come and find me.'"

"And when you have 'found'?"

"The clever woman is never 'found'—even by herself." Then he glanced keenly and kindly at his hostess. "Margaret, you're looking terribly tired."

There was a quiver, as of pain, under the sable rug, and a long-drawn, sobbing sigh. Inskip left his chair, knelt down beside the sofa, and took one of the beautiful hands in his.

"My poor, poor little martyr! Is the pain more damnable than usual to-night?"

"Yes, Hughie."

He gave a quick frown, as if in pain himself. "Is it your shoulder, you poor child?"

"No, Hughie. . . . it's my heart."

He looked at her uncomprehendingly.

With a passionate gesture Margaret Stair flung off her rug, and, leaning heavily on her stick, rose to her feet. Inskip put out a protecting hand, but she pushed it aside, almost irritably.

"Last night was a *première* at the St. James; Pinero's new play, and his masterpiece. It was *my* play, *my* part, *my* masterpiece. It was written round me, for me. It would have been my finest work. It has been waiting two years for me while my American contracts were running out. I was to have been Lisa Ossian, a woman-spy in Russia. She was one of

Pinero's magnificently bad women—the very strength of her nature was its weakness. Oh, Hughie, Hughie, how I loved that Lisa! All the while I was in America playing tepid tragedy I thought, 'Ah, there is Lisa waiting for you in London.' And now. . . . and now—" her beautiful voice sank to a whisper, like the whisper of a 'cello. . . . "Last night I lay here and lived through it all. The long *queue* outside the pit door in King Street from early morning; the glad rush in at seven; the lights; the music; the boxes filling; the Prime Minister in the stalls; the Portuguese Ambassador; all the critics—how well, how well I know it! The nerves all strained to breaking-point behind the scenes . . . then the curtain ringing up after the weeks of inchoate striving and pain—and the birth of a great play. At twenty minutes past ten Lisa was having her deathless scene with her lover and I—I was lying here on this couch, counting the beats of my breaking heart."

Inskip, his own heart beating in a very turbulent fashion, watched her, fascination utter and helpless overwhelming his pity—which was great. Margaret Stair was standing erect, her long gown falling in soft folds around her tall and graceful figure. It was made of some wonderful Persian silk of rich and beautiful colouring, and, as she moved and the soft golden light from the fire fell upon it, it glowed now green, now turquoise blue, now deep, burnt orange. Her head was thrown back, her low, liquid voice, with its full throat notes vibrating, her eyes darker than usual with unshed tears. The man, watching and listening, felt spell-bound. It was hardly the tragedy of the thing

that effected him—though that was intense. It was the tragedy as expressed by the *tragedienne*, and the greatest *tragedienne* of her day.

Suddenly the beautiful figure collapsed. Margaret Stair caught quickly at the end of the sofa, lay down on it, and buried her face in her hands.

"And I'm only twenty-eight, Hughie! Only twenty-eight! And I loved my art *so much*. I—I don't want to say wicked things, but sometimes I read the parable of the Talents—the only parable that appeals to me, just as it does to many of us, because it's so intensely modern. I read it and its bitter comment on the inept and the ineffective, and I wonder what answer God will give to the men and to the women who turn to Him in bitterness, and ask why He has crushed and buried their talent."

Mr. Inskip, a little uncertain of his ground (the study of parables having been very much neglected by him), looked his entire sympathy, but remained silent.

"Am I giving you the blues, you poor boy?" Margaret asked suddenly, conscious of a certain unrest in the atmosphere.

Hugh Inskip was pacing up and down the hall restlessly, one hand in his trouser-pocket, the other caressing his black beard.

"Yes," he said, "that is, no—I don't know what I'm saying. Margaret, have the goodness not to speak for a minute or so."

Mrs. Stair was too entirely accustomed to the strangeness of her friend to feel surprise, and too much mistress of her features to have shown any had she felt it. She merely closed her humorous mouth, and

glanced at the little diamond-set watch that girdled her wrist.

The minute hand had ticked off ten strokes before Mr. Inskip paused in his restless walk. Then he turned and faced his hostess, who was patiently gazing in front of her.

"Margaret," said he, "can you stand at *all* without your stick?"

"No, Hughie. I should sway, and get dizzy."

"Is your pain worse in the daytime, or at night?"

"I feel my best at night, but in the morning sometimes I think my back will break."

"When you lie on your sofa at night, do you feel perfectly well—save for helplessness?"

"Yes, *save for helplessness*," Mrs. Stair answered, with some amount of bitterness in her tone. "In fact, Mr. Inskip, if you want to analyse the matter very thoroughly, I feel as comfortable and at my ease as the log of wood that has once been an oak in a forest."

"The log of wood has its destiny," said Inskip. "It can glow, and it can burn."

"*This* log burns," said Margaret Stair, and her beautiful, tragic face quivered for one moment. Then she recovered herself. "Hughie, you'd better go to bed, and not set me alight."

And Mr. Inskip understood her meaning so thoroughly that he knelt beside her sofa, and took her hand in his own. For between the rather cynical journalist-playwright, and the very emotional *tragedienne* there was the bond of an almost perfect friendship. Whether for the woman matters would have stood just where they did, save for her accident,

is problematical ; but, apart from brief moments when her physical attractions had almost overpowered him, the man's affection for her had been merely brotherly.

"Margaret, I'm going to write a play for you."

She gazed at him in incredulous astonishment.

"A play for you as *you*—a woman lying on the sofa all the while. Will you act it?"

"*Hughie!*"

"It will be a tough job for me, but I have an inkling I can do it. If I can, will you play it?"

"Oh, Hughie, what can I say? What can I say?" She was quivering with excitement. He could feel her pulse racing, as he held her hand.

"When one thinks of it," remarked Mr. Inskip, rather diffidently, "an actress's chief asset does not lie in her skirt, and all that therein is. You won't be able to trail it across the floor or down the stairs, or swish it, or kick it, or hobble in it, or look unutterable things when your husband falls over it. But you still can shrug your shoulders, and raise your eyebrows, and put your tongue in your cheek."

"Hughie, I *never* put my tongue in my cheek!"

"I was trying to be vulgar," Mr. Inskip said gloomily, "and it's a thing I cannot be with any success. I have fears for my play."

"Oh, just a little touch will do," Mrs. Stair said, soothingly. "It need only be very little, but of course it *must* be there. But Hughie, what am I to do besides lying on the sofa, shrugging my shoulders?"

"Nothing is formulated in my brain yet—the idea only flashed through it half an hour ago. But I think you shall have been crippled through an accident, and

be forced to lie on your sofa watching your lover fall under the sway of another woman."

"Hughie, I shall *love* it!"

"After the marriage, his love shall return to you. You are more beautiful on a sofa, you know, Margaret, than any woman off it."

"Well—what happens?"

"I am undecided at this moment. I think I shall leave it to you. Shall I make you a good woman, or a bad woman, Margaret?"

She dropped her eyes, which had been rivetted to his face. Two distinct and alien emotions quivered for a moment round her full and beautiful mouth. Then she answered, without looking at him:

"A little of both, please, Hughie."

CHAPTER IV

THROUGH the great door of the tithe-barn, which was flung open to its widest extent, Iris Davenant could watch at intervals the green gentleness of the rectory lawn, the old walnut-tree which Queen Elizabeth had planted, and the distant orchard ruddy with its sunlit fruit. It was a prosperous, well-fed garden, from the perfumeless pink roses clambering distractingly up the low white house, to the purple peaches and golden apricots on the red-brick southern wall.

The barn was very warm; perspiration stood on the brows of some of the school children; the air was redolent of the "toilet soap" of a grocery store, and of boot-blackening. It was a curious and all-pervasive odour. In after years Iris Davenant never wholly forgot it; sometimes she dreamed of it; at other times, by merely closing her eyes, she could conjure up the long barn with its white-washed cattle-stalls, the groups of overpoweringly-clean children, and the ringing, decisive tones of the indefatigable Mr. Ponsonby.

That afternoon her father was conducting a funeral in the little grass-grown churchyard across the way. She could hear the solemn tolling of the deep tenor bell, and Paul Davenant's beautiful voice rolling out the words: "I am the Resurrection and the Life."

She collected her scattered wits, and brought them to bear on the group of children gathered round her.

" And in the centre of that garden," she continued, "there was a great bush of white geranium; very scented, and very perfect. The petals were as heavy as white velvet, and when you touched them you forgot God; all you remembered was that you were lovely, and that it was good to be loved. Now in this garden was every flower you could conceive, and of every imaginable colour—but there was nothing white. There was the amber eschscholtzia and the golden sunflower, the flaming poppy and the violet clematis, the sulphur-coloured scabious and the wild riot of the fuchsia-bush and, in the centre of it all, this beautiful, unstained thing of utter purity.

"And Eve plunged her hands into it, and gathered an armful, and crushed it to her breast. . . . And as she held it and looked down on it with eyes of an adoring love, lo! it turned blood-red; and, as she gazed in horror, it took on the passion-colour of a solemn sunset, and then the emerald-green of a snake, and then it became of a thick and oily blackness, like the blackness of a thundery night. And"

The children, breathless and excited, leaned forward, the interest of youth shining in their eager eyes; but Iris paused abruptly, conscious of a tall, erect figure which had been hovering behind her back for some minutes.

"Mis Siris," said a clear, ringing voice with some indignation in it, "would you mind playing the harmonium for our final hymn."

With the aloof and scornful air to which the young

man was well-accustomed, the girl strolled over to the other end of the barn, and collected her music. Mr. Ponsonby, his cheeks warm with displeasure, opened his Bible and read aloud the third chapter of Genesis.

"That is what really happened," he told the little group of uninterested youngsters whose eyes, one and all, were straying to the opposite end of the barn, where Miss Davenant, in her soft white gown, was opening the harmonium.

It was an exquisite afternoon in mid-September: a thin white haze hovered perpetually over the turquoise velvet of the sky. Freed from school, Iris Davenant sought the shade of the large walnut-tree that stood in the centre of the rectory lawn, and lay on a soft-cushioned divan, her eyes half-closed. The pungent odour of the leaves above her head was not unpleasant; in the distance the pink roses on the white walls of the house did not strike her as so monotonously like a Birket-Foster sketch as usual; Mr. Ponsonby was at the other end of the village, instilling Christian principles into a class of lads reclaimed from cricket; her father had finished his funeral-service, and was playing wonderful Chopin-like minor chords on the organ. Iris, whose mind was very much in tune with that of Chopin and similar souls, listened with dreamy pleasure.

She had had no evening walks on the moors for a week. She had not seen Mr. Inskip for a week. Perhaps she would never see him again. Something in the girl's heart struggled like an imprisoned bird at the thought.

"I will go for a walk to-night," she murmured to herself.

It would be difficult to explain adequately, while avoiding a just criticism of exaggeration, the extraordinary difference these innocently improper walks made to Iris Davenant's life just then.

If they had been taken in daylight, Mr. Inskip, be he never so fascinating, would not have had the same effect upon her imagination; but, as matters stood, the grey veil of night's mystery, coupled with the daring audacity of the adventure—the twofold fact, that is, that she could not see very much of his dark, peculiar face, and was deliciously afraid all the while that she herself might be seen and recognised by a tiresome parishioner—made the affair an Event.

Events were rare to poor Iris, living as she termed it in "exile" in this delightful little village, with its old-world garden, its duck pond, its thick fringe of black-green trees, its cobbled pavement, and its ancient church full of beautiful old stained glass.

She would have tolerated the village well enough if it had been denuded of its five public-houses and most of its inhabitants; she thought ducks horrid, ungraceful creatures—always wallowing about in the mud; the cobbled pavement displeased both her eyes and her ankles; she only liked her father's beautiful church when it was empty.

"God made the country, Mis Siris, and man made the town," Mr. Ponsonby had informed his rector's unenthusiastic daughter one lovely summer's day.

But she only turned her grave grey eyes upon him

indifferently, and gave him the apt corollary of his remark.

"And who made the country people?"

Mr. Ponsonby was stung by her reply, pachydermatous though he was. He took the opportunity, before he left her, to observe that he had been born in East Ham, educated at Canterbury, taken his degree at Durham, and had his first curacy in Glasgow.

But he gained no flavour of cosmopolitanism with Miss Davenant thereby. She murmured, "East Ham, what an appetising name. It makes one think of sandwiches and picnics." And a few days afterwards, when the Bishop of London was conducting a confirmation in the village, the horrified curate heard Miss Siris informing his Lordship that Mr. Ponsonby, too, was from the great city, and had taken his degree at East Ham.

He could never be quite certain if she did it from malice aforethought, or not. She looked, as he had thought when he first saw her, a most innocent, inoffensive little thing; but her conduct baffled him. The only fact he was quite certain about Miss Davenant was that she sinned daily the unforgiveable sin in the clergyman's daughter. She was utterly and entirely indifferent to parochial matters.

Meanwhile, Iris lived her own inward life, while her outward body fulfilled, indifferently enough, the pen-sive duties of clerical curriculum. She was, by turns, and for weeks together, a great actress, a great singer, a great novelist, or a great artist. In the days of Mrs. Stair's triumphs, Iris, her little bedroom crowded with photographs of Margaret's exquisite face, would

imagine herself nightly before the footlights, bowing to a rapturous audience, seeing a conservatory full of bouquets deposited with unerring accuracy at her feet. When she looked into the long glass door of her white wardrobe it was not the vision of a girl in a pink dressing-gown, with a gentle face and quiet eyes, that confronted her—it was Mrs. Stair, resplendent in her warm, glowing, southern beauty, her dark eyes holding a thousand invitations to unknown delights, diamonds twinkling in the shadows of her lovely hair.

This pleasure, vicarious though it might be, was of infinite satisfaction to Iris, and gave colour of myriad hue to the grey monotone of her life. It had one incalculable advantage over the real thing—it could be dissolved at will. Also it had a miraculous quality—it was two-sexed.

Iris had been Monsieur Dreyfus for weeks together—his splendid, ill-used righteousness confined with her in prison walls (the rectory); the clang and the tumult of notoriety giving an unspeakable pleasure to all her dismal days. When the case was over she could have wept from weariness.

Also she was Signor Marconi for quite a long while, borrowing, for the purpose, scientific treatises from Mr. Hilyard's anything but extensive library. Most of poor Godfrey's books were on such uninspiring topics as chemical manures, and mangel-wurzels, but he was willing to have bought the sun, the stars, and the moon, and to confine all three within his glass-shelves, if it would give Iris Davenant one moment's pleasure. He stood beside her, looking down on the little head

he loved, as the girl regarded with unspeakable disdain his uncultured volumes.

"Tell me what you want," he said, "and I'll run up to town to-morrow and get it."

"I want all the books that have been written on wireless telegraphy," said Iris.

He thought her more wonderful than ever, and he went to London, at great personal inconvenience, the very next day, returning with various pamphlets and treatises which Iris accepted gratefully, with one of her glances of dreamy pleasure for which Godfrey would have died. He felt his responsibility as a good business man, and her friend, however, and gave her a word of advice—a fatal habit for anyone to acquire.

"Remember Dunlop tyres, dear," he said gently, "and be very careful. Let my stockbroker watch the market for you."

Iris gave him one look of utter horror, and would not speak to him for weeks. Hilyard, who had not the slightest idea how he had offended her, became, as a result of this, hopelessly prejudiced against wireless telegraphy, and often said to his mother that he could see nothing in it at all.

Meanwhile, his well-beloved proceeded undisturbed on her romantic way, and was never herself for an hour together. Her taste in these matters was unerring, and she only understudied those who were very much talked about, were very beautiful, or very clever. This made her repertoire a singularly delightful one; and, though Miss Davenant was a mere understudy and knew it, still her principal was constantly indisposed for the afternoon or evening; an opportunity which

Iris invariably seized and turned to her own account in a manner that would soon have brought her trouble in "the profession." Thus Marconi, with Iris playing his part, would exercise his marvellous brain by extemporising dreamy melodies on the church organ; while Margaret Stair would take first prize at a tennis tournament.

Hilyard, when they went for walks together—for Iris was sometimes divinely kind to him, and allowed him to carry her golf-clubs or to wheel her bicycle up hills—often asked her why she was so silent.

"I never in all my born days met a little girl who held her tongue like you do, Iris," he said once. "Why is it?"

"I like to meditate," she told him.

Godfrey did not enquire what she was meditating about, and would have been rather surprised if he had known. For Iris, that particular afternoon, was seeing herself as a strikingly handsome girl who had thrown vitriol in the face of her aggravating and philandering lover. The papers were full of the case, and teemed with letters of sympathy for the girl and contempt for the man. Miss Davenant, who did not even know what vitriol was, and certainly did not understand the consuming passion that could transform violent love to violent hatred, was living through it all with the intensest enjoyment. She was Elsie Ferguson, the most talked-of girl of the day.

But Godfrey, looking, as he often looked, at the little, pure profile, at Iris's short, disdainful lip, at her soft fair hair that fell over the low white forehead in

childish waves, only felt again, as he had felt so many times before, what angels women were with their white and innocent thoughts, and what low and sin-smirched blackguards were men.

Now Iris, as will have been seen, communed daily with the Great Elect of the world, and derived from it all intense and continued pleasure. But with it there was invariably a strain, and, following it, an exhaustion. Her imagination could never be at rest—and it often wanted rest badly. The invisible world was to her the real world to a very great extent, but it was a world of which she was the creator, and in which she moved supreme—nobody would do anything in it unless she went behind them and gave them a *jog*. Sometimes, when she was excited, *jogging* was fine fun; but sometimes it was such an effort that she could have wept from fatigue.

Then appeared the gentleman who required no *jogs*.

The chords on the organ stopped abruptly, and she saw her father's bent old figure crossing the lawn. He smiled gently at her, and sank into a chair at her side.

"Is tea ready, Iris? Or do you think we should wait for Ponsonby?"

"Mr. Ponsonby is busy with his guild-boys, and will not be here till five, if then."

Over Mr. Davenant's face flitted a smile of relief which he did not endeavour to conceal from his daughter. He lay back in his chair, and thanked her with a touch of his gentle old hand when she brought him a cup of tea.

"Do not let me lie too long in this garden, Iris, my child. I have work to do."

"What work can you possibly have at a Sunday afternoon tea-time, father?"

"I have my sermon for this evening well in my mind, but—but I cannot find a text for it."

"The inspired scribes of old little knew the troubles awaiting their lineal descendants did they?" the girl asked dreamily, her eyes on a distant figure slowly ascending the churchyard steps. "Why need you have a text?"

"My people don't believe in the good of a sermon, if there is no text."

Iris, subtly conscious that she would often be completely satisfied with a text without a sermon, was silent.

"And Ponsonby doesn't think it the thing," continued the old man.

"What does it matter what he thinks? And what does it matter if it *does* matter what he thinks?"

"I have my headings all right," her father murmured, "and I know exactly what I want to say—which is an untold relief to me. Perhaps the text will flash into my mind at the moment."

Iris Davenant's dreamy face lit up with a smile, half tender, half-amused, and it was thus that Mr. Inskip saw it as he entered the rectory garden by the old lichgate.

"Iris," said the rector, who was short-sighted, "there is Ponsonby. It must be five, after all. How astonishingly swiftly this afternoon has flown." And in his voice was a subtle flavour of regret.

"It is not the curate," Iris answered.

"Ah! Now I see it is Inskip, whom I asked to drop in some time to look at my Persian manuscripts. I met him with young Hilyard yesterday." He glanced for a second at the peaceful little tea-table, his daughter's reposeful figure, his own half-finished pipe. Somehow on this, as on other Sunday afternoons, he felt a decided leaning towards the gentle art of domesticity—a definite disinclination for any strenuous effort of the brain.

His daughter, who had seen the glance and understood it, looked up at him, smiling gently.

"The garden is very lovely this afternoon. I don't remember such a pleasant tea for ages."

"No," said Paul Davenant. He thought of the class so fortunately conducted at the other end of the village; and then felt guilty.

"Remember you have a text to find. Perhaps your friend will be able to help you."

"Perhaps he will," the old man said dubiously.

"It is just the afternoon for Persian manuscripts. How clever of Mr. Inskip to come. Shall I send some tea in to him?"

"No, no," the rector said, a firmer note creeping into his voice. "I—I—it is not often I feel like this you know, Iris, but positively the idea of Persian manuscripts is obnoxious to me this afternoon."

"I am afraid Mr. Inskip will be terribly disappointed."

"Inskip," Mr. Davenant called, making a tube of his hands, "don't ring. Come down here."

The sun was casting a long spear of golden light

through the shining leaves of the walnut tree: the spear's point culminated on Iris Davenant's small foot, which peeped from under the hem of her soft white gown. Mr. Inskip, slowly crossing the lawn, scrutinized the little picture with immobile eyes. The old man, with his beautiful face and noble, courtly bearing the languorous deck-chairs and the tea-table the girl with the eyes that said too little, and the mouth that said too much.

As he talked casually to his host he watched his host's daughter in the seemingly unobservant way which was a trick of his. One of his Oxford friends had said of him: "If he were interested, Hugh Inskip could tell you the number of hairpins a girl wore by looking at her shoe-laces. If he weren't interested, he might count the hairpins and classify them as shoe-laces." And it was an understanding summary. The characteristic had clung to Inskip all his life.

So this afternoon his eyes hovered round the little foot and the white gown, occasionally over Miss Davenant's fair head, and afterwards, writing a chapter of his last and shortest novel, he drew a little pen sketch of the girl.

"Marianne," wrote Inskip, "*possesses the curious stillness of a bird poised for flight, the controlled silence characteristic of a very live thing. She sits for half an hour saying nothing at all, looking every unimaginable thought; then she will remark something startlingly incisive and original, with an air of enlightened virginity. She probably has a riotous imagination, and is entirely passionless—a dangerously fascinating combination, but one likely to land*

its owner in very deep water. Sometimes in her grey eyes one notices an expression of discreetly-veiled curiosity; then one is baffled by a shadow of boredom that extinguishes everything, and writes rectory rose-garden all over her. When her hour comes she will almost certainly be violently in love with love, and very much upset by the demonstrations of her lover; who, if he be wise, will take no notice of any of her protestations at all."

While Mr. Inskip was arriving at this not entirely inaccurate summary of his young hostess, Iris had all the appearance of a complete absorption in her father's remarks on the tendency of modern plays.

"The more poignantly moral and uplifting a drama," said Paul Davenant, absently (for his mind still hovered uneasily around his textless sermon), "the more depressing is the environment. Virtue can be most intensely exciting, if only a playwright could be got to understand it."

Mr. Inskip, unaware that the speaker had married, and loved very passionately, a little Russian dancing-girl, was conscious of some surprise, until he remembered that he knew nothing at all about country rectors, who might, quite imaginably, be all like this.

"Vice and selfishness, heartlessness and *ennui*," continued the old man, "are all dreary, boring things. It is only on the stage that they twinkle and glow like merry little stars. On the other hand, there is nothing so uplifting as renunciation, nothing so magnificently inspiring as the driving out of many devils from the soul. Why, then, should it be accompanied by slow

and sombre music, the pale-faced heroine, the hero with the lank, disordered hair? "

Inskip had a momentary vision of Margaret Stair, after one of her magnificent third acts, careering joyously round the stage, trumpet in hand, like a triumphant angel by Rossetti. He lowered his long black eyes for a second. When he raised them it was to meet Iris Davenant's quiet grey ones. With a sudden startling flash he was conscious that this little white, silent girl had a very keen sense of humour, too.

"The British Public," said Inskip, "is like a child in the market-place. If you want it to dance, you must assuredly must pipe to it. It has not learnt, it will never learn, to take things for granted—if it would, there'd be no need of the grandmotherly protection of the Censor."

But he spoke to a man with deaf ears, for the allusion to dancing had brought back to Paul Davenant for one moment a vision of his dark-eyed bride as he first saw her in a Russian ballet; and from that his mind wandered to the emptiness of the years that followed her tragic death in giving birth to Iris; and from that to the green pastures and still waters of rectorial life; and from that, with a swift jump, to the sorrowful fact that the British Public would not take things for granted, and that his sermon still wanted a text.

He got up. "I have some work to do," said he. "If you will kindly wait here for a short time, I shall soon be delighted to show you the manuscripts."

It was very drowsy and peaceful in the old garden.

Inskip felt the quietude particularly grateful. He had all the morning been wrestling with the first act of his play (always most depressing of efforts to the dramatist); Margaret had been *exigante* in the extreme. The curtain was to rise with her on a sofa, the effect was to be poignant and immediate, there could be no working up for a carefully-prepared entry. Inskip had striven with the subject and with her until the perspiration had broken out on his brow. Finally he had left the Hall in a tumult, and walked unseeing through the many fields and meadows of the rectory glebe.

And now, refreshed by tea and fortified by cushions, the plaintive, incessant whirring of bees in the leaves above his head, the perfume of elderberries in his nostrils, he lay back in his chair and watched his hostess.

She looked, he thought, very young, and quite extraordinarily innocent. He wondered, idly, if anyone could be quite as innocent as Iris Davenant looked. There was almost a touch of austerity in the low white brow, and the little pointed chin . . . and then there was that fascinating (to Inskip) contradiction of the eyes like silent, shallow pools, and the quivering, controlled mouth of a woman.

"I hope I was never rude to you on the moor," he said, suddenly. "It was always so dusky. I never saw you properly. I didn't realise . . ."

"Didn't realise what?"

"Didn't realise you were such a child."

She gave him a baffling look, and Mr. Inskip again felt the strong desire to come to closer quarters, to

put out a firm hand and grasp the something elusive that evaded him.

"You seemed to belong to another world—a dream-world, those nights," he continued, "and when you spoke it broke a mystic spell. I fear I was terribly *gauche* when I tried to break you of your habit of talking."

"I liked you best when you were rude," said Iris.

"You are very generous to a boor."

"I used to watch your expression when you first appeared, and, if you were walking with your head poked forward and your hands behind your back, I used to think: 'Now he will be rude again.'"

It was impossible not to feel flattered. Mr. Inskip never remembered having been the subject of such searching observation before—or was it that no woman yet had been wise enough to tell him of it? He felt a stronger desire than ever to come to close quarters. (Though the closest quarters, where he was concerned, were very definitely outside the iron railings of his garden gate. Indeed, his whole life, so far, had been subtly ruled by the same motive that impels the owner of a neat red villa—self-contained—to inscribe upon his door, "No Circulars. No Bottles. No Canvassers. No Street Cries. Beware of the Dog.")

"And was my head generally poked forward," he enquired.

"It was," Miss Davenant replied, genuine satisfaction in her voice.

"I feared it was," said Inskip, with some confusion.

"Environment has so much to do with what we call manners."

"And what are manners after all?" the girl enquired. Inskip liked her better than ever.

"I suppose they are the toll levied by civilisation," he hazarded, dubiously, "but it's a toll that a lot of us neglect to pay."

"You never need pay it to me. I liked you so much when you were rude."

She looked more of a child than ever. Inskip remembered suddenly the wonderful powers of imagination he had heard her credited with, and wished he had known her longer.

"It's difficult to be rude in a rectory garden," he said lazily. He saw her face stiffen suddenly. "She does not like rectory gardens," he thought to himself.

Now Iris's imagination (that most perilous of gifts to a woman) was running riot this afternoon. For the first time since her childhood's days she saw herself in a world unbordered by Sunday Schools on the left and Temperance Guilds on the right—in a delicious world where people looked vague politeness when Bands of Hope were mentioned, and frankly puzzled at allusions to Mothers' Meetings. Oh! for a world where mothers *never* met. Her heart throbbed at the prospect.

Hitherto, in the dream-world wherein she spent most of her day (to the intense annoyance of Mr. Ponsonby and other strenuous workers), the rectory-world was always there—and she outside it, looking on in tumult and rebellion. If she went for long and lonely walks, and steeped her soul in the fierce chastity of the moor, it was to be recalled by the tinkle-tinkle of the school bell; if she had interesting and

indefinite talks with her father (who was always delightfully indefinite), it was to be brought to earth by Mr. Ponsonby, that strenuous upholder of the Definite, that exemplary apostle of the Accurate, who, she knew, was now only awaiting an opportunity to instruct her on the *ipso facto* truths of the Garden of Eden. She had always been her own heroine in it all. Iris, the Misunderstood; Iris, the Thrown-Away; Iris, who would have been a Somebody—somewhere else.

But this afternoon, under the green-spreading walnut-tree, her heart throbbing in a very delightful way, the heroine seemed to drift from her mental vision, dissolved in a vapour of indecision, and behind it, lo! the Hero.

He had challenged her imagination the first time she saw him, now a year ago, arriving at the Hall with the milk, his suit-case wedged between two tin cans. Iris did not know that the motor-car sent to meet him by Mrs. Stair had broken down midway up the hill. She only saw the tall, unusual-looking man, with the piercing black eyes and the pointed black beard, who looked like a Russian god in a milk-cart.

His peculiar tramps at night also appealed to her vivid imagination. He wanted, she felt certain, to be alone with the Spirit of the Moor. If anyone had told her that Mr. Inskip suffered in no small degree from insomnia, and found the dampness of evening a remedy, she would have been bitterly chagrined. For, to the imaginative, the persisting, insistent cry of the body is a weariness and an unwelcomed imposition.

Then his relations to Margaret Stair—that beautiful,

pathetic woman who had rented the Hall for two successive autumns. The villagers "talked." Iris, with the Davenant disdain inherited from her father, held proudly aloof from the strife of tongues. But sometimes, when the guests of Mrs. Stair's shooting parties had all left, and Hugh Inskip remained for three or four days, an arrow, swift, and sharp, seemed to pierce her heart—for she found him more than interesting.

And now he reclined in a deck-chair opposite her, complaining in his very unemotional voice that he felt a difficulty in being rude in a rectory garden!

CHAPTER V

C HARLES EDWARD PONSONBY closed the vestry door with unnecessary vigour, locked it with a decisive click, acknowledged with a curt dignity the cheery "good-night" of the verger, who was shovelling cinders into the heating-chamber, and walked briskly away from the church, biting his lips.

Miss Davenant, whose duty it was to play the organ for choir-practice every Thursday evening, had not appeared. This was the third week the same thing had happened. Mr. Ponsonby had been obliged to take her place himself, and had slipped on to the pedals with both feet, creating a magnificent chord. The choristers had tittered, and he had hurt his knee and dustied his trousers. Also, being a curate, he could say nothing but "Boys, boys, remember where you are."

He walked quickly along the village street in the direction of his rooms. He wanted his supper and he wanted a pipe. He did not think it consistent with the dignity of his calling to smoke out of doors, consequently the goddess Nicotine took on with him something of the strange attractiveness of a secret sin. He had a great yearning for her this evening; yet he paused outside his door; hesitated, and passed on. His supper, he knew, would be cold lamb. Cold

lamb would still be cold lamb an hour hence. He passed on further.

He had in him all the impulses of the ardent reformer, and he was badly worried. Never had he been in such a parish; there was no method; no ardent rivalry with nonconformity; no missions; no anything at all. Never had he had such a rector. Mr. Davenant was old—but that was no excuse for him, thought the curate, for he had probably been as bad, if not worse, when he was young. He was late for everything; he was patient with everything; to the worst examples of backsliding (such as attendance at chapel), he would merely say, "We have all much to learn—much to learn in the chapel of each other's souls" (whatever that might mean); to other misdemeanours—for the village was like most villages—he would murmur, "Human Nature," and look sad. He had never been known to reprove sin by words. Edward Ponsonby often wondered why, then, he had entered the Church—was not that Holy Calling the mystic entry to the Judgment Throne? His sermons were abstruse—when they were not heterodox. Mr. Ponsonby had detected leanings towards Rome on more than one occasion, and had been secretly a little elated (for is there any surer road towards prominence in the clerical world than the hurried visit of an irate archdeacon, followed by a sublime reproof from the Episcopal chair?). Unfortunately, Mr. Ponsonby's elation was turned to dismay before the sermon's conclusion by very definite tributes to the pure idealism of the Quaker brotherhood.

And the daughter was worse. If the father fulfilled

his duties at the eleventh hour, the child's were still undone at the twelfth. Where the rector was patient to the point of foolishness, Miss Davenant was bored by the village and all that therein was. If the old man's views erred in the direction of latitudinarianism, the young lady's were decadent, if they were not atheistical. Mr. Ponsonby, in after years, had but to close his eyes to conjure up a little semicircle of eager faces, and to hear Miss Davenant's voice in the poisoned story of Eve.

And now the whole village was ringing with the history of these evening walks.

Mr. Ponsonby always turned a deaf ear to gossip, having acquired something of the aloofness of his gentle old rector in the matter. But, though he refused to listen to information vouchsafed by a parishioner, he kept his eyes remarkably wide open, and very few things could be told him of a villager of which he was not already aware.

He had seen Iris Davenant returning on three separate occasions from the moor with Mr. Inskip, each time after ten o'clock at night. Others had seen her more often still. The talk ran round and round the parish like wildfire; Mr. Ponsonby, single-handed, was powerless to check it. To speak to Paul Davenant were out of the question—there was a certain hauteur in the old man which, on rare occasions, rose to the surface, and put as it were a stone wall between him and the outside world. Mr. Ponsonby had seen this wall before springing up like a mushroom, and he had no desire again to encounter it. To reprove Iris Davenant were worse than useless. She would pick

up her skirts and stroll off, as if the reprover were a totally uninteresting worm. Mr. Ponsonby had always found her very trying.

The curate was honestly distressed. He had no desire whatsoever to interfere with Miss Davenant's love affairs—within limits. But surely any man of the world—and Mr. Ponsonby saw no reason why a man of God should not also be a man of the world—would consider ten o'clock at night, on a wild moorland, outside the limits. In addition, a subtle insult had been conveyed to the church and himself *via* the neglected choir practice. Such conduct must be sternly rebuked.

Where the father and the daughter were so incapable of reasonable behaviour there appeared only the lover to tackle; and Mr. Ponsonby was a little uncertain of Hugh Inskip. He certainly was a gentleman (by which Mr. Ponsonby meant that he had been to college and spoke with a cultured accent), but he, alas! was a little mad, too. The very unhappy curate pushed his hair from his fevered brow with an irritable hand. It was this *madness* that annoyed him so. Why could not his rector and his parishioners be like others? Why could not their virtues be the virtues of the virtuous, and their vices the vices of the vicious? If another clergyman were so lax in the fulfilment of his pastoral duties, one might almost unerringly lay the blame on drink or senile decay. But Paul Davenant was alike a total abstainer, and the possessor of a scholarly brain which Mr. Ponsonby regarded with private awe. If another man and girl met night after night secretly on a deserted

moor, one might look for disaster. But Mr. Ponsonby had no fear that disaster, in the accepted sense of the word, awaited Inskip and his rector's daughter. It was far more likely, he thought, that they were collaborating in a decadent poem on some Bible incident. When he had listened in frigid silence to the village scandal he had always congratulated himself privately (as a man of the world), that, at least, he had not misjudged those two mad young people.

But the thing must be stopped; and he must stop it.

Thus pondering he reached the gates of the Hall, and walked up the short drive leading to the big Gothic door in front of which swung a small globe of golden light set in a watchman's lantern. He pulled the heavy iron chain attached to the bell, asked if Mr. Inskip were at home, and was admitted.

"Step this way, sir," said the young footman, and led Mr. Ponsonby through the blue-carpeted entrance, past Margaret Stair's marvellous picture, to a small room at the end of a long corridor—flung open the door, and announced:

"The Reverend Chawles Ponsonby," to a startled and bewildered man who, manuscript in hand, was pacing up and down the room, talking to himself in a deep and impassioned voice.

("As mad as a hatter," thought the wearied curate, bowing stiffly.)

On the table by the window were some small chairs and ottomans, apparently taken from a doll's house; also three little mannikins fashionably attired. Mr. Inskip, always an enthusiast in the minute detail of

his work, had an invariable habit of arranging the movement and motion of his plays from models, and worked with a plan and lay figures before him. Mr. Ponsonby who—man of the world though he was—was unsupplied with the key to this astonishing procedure, merely cast one glance at the table, and made a resolution.

"I will be surprised at nothing," he thought. "At *nothing*."

Which resolution was soon to be put to the test. Hugh Inskip, glancing over his shoulder as the door opened, appeared a shade annoyed as the lean, straight figure of the clergyman entered, but the next moment a gleam of something like satisfaction flashed across his inscrutable face.

"Good morning, Ponsonby—that is to say, good evening. Just lie across that sofa a second, will you? Pull the rug up, and close your eyes."

The indignant clergyman pressed his thin lips close together, and regarded his host with a steady gaze. Mr. Inskip appeared to be sober—sober and very much in earnest, for already he was wheeling a light couch forward, and was holding a red rug in one hand, while with the other he indicated his desire that Mr. Ponsonby should recline under it.

"If the evidence of my ears has not deceived me," began the astonished witness of this eccentricity, "I can only——" but he got no further. For, with a light push, Mr. Inskip had landed him neatly on the soft pillows of a low white couch, flung the rug over his stiff and agitated frame, and hastily vanished behind a screen at the end of the room.

What happened afterwards Mr. Ponsonby never could recall quite accurately, for, just as he was about to spring up from the couch, Hugh Inskip, with a brow of thunder, burst from behind the screen and waved him back.

"Lie still, you jackass!" (It *could* not have been that, yet to the horrified curate it sounded very like it.)

Then, pouring out an impassioned rhetoric in what appeared to be Russian, Inskip hastened to the sofa, and knelt before it. The next moment he got up, sane and collected, crossed to the table, re-arranged his dolls, and made a note in his manuscript.

Mr. Ponsonby rose with some dignity.

"I await your explanation, sir," he said, quietly.

Hugh Inskip, unconcerned and impertinent, patted him on the shoulder.

"Have a drink, old man," said he.

"I never drink," said Mr. Ponsonby. "That is, only cider," he corrected himself hastily, for he was very truthful.

"Then cider it shall be." And, before the very indignant curate could word his protest, he found himself pushed into a chair, a fizzling tumbler beside him, and a cigar in his hand.

A man of the world has necessarily to encounter and countenance various types of humanity, and learns to present to each type a passive face. That more subtle creature—the student of the world—has, behind the passivity, the heart that craves a deeper understanding of all other hearts. Mr. Ponsonby had the outer shell without the inner kernel; that is, he avoided the labyrinth and reached his destination by the shortest

of all possible cuts. He was always There—just There; while his old rector, for whom he had a secret pity, was stumbling slowly along the more difficult paths of life.

So now, cigar in hand, unlit; cider before him, untasted; he mentally consigned Mr. Inskip's extraordinary procedure to amiable lunacy, and calmly passed on to his great theme.

"It is one of the unwelcome responsibilities of my calling," he began, "to be compelled by conscience to speak when I would much rather be silent."

"Still, that's over for the week, old chap," murmured Mr. Inskip, sympathetically, having a vague notion that his severe-looking guest was referring to his sermons.

"We clergy hear so much we would rather not hear."

Mr. Inskip lifted a languid eyebrow. His momentary reflection was that the auditors of Mr. Ponsonby's addresses might have uttered the same complaint.

"And it is as a friend that I come here to-night."

"You were in the very nick of time, too," said Mr. Inskip. "I am more than obliged to you."

Mr. Ponsonby raised a protesting hand. "When once a scandal has been started," said he, "it is next to impossible to kill it."

Inskip glanced rather curiously at his didactic guest. Nobody, certainly, looked less likely to be the cause of scandal than did Charles Edward Ponsonby at that moment, sitting bolt upright in his chair, his chin well out and his blue eyes shining.

"One can bring a libel action," he hazarded, "though it's a deuce of a bore."

"But when there is *truth* in the scandal?"

"The greater the truth," said Mr. Inskip soothingly, "the greater the libel."

Mr. Ponsonby took one sip of his cider, and put down his glass. He determined to come to close quarters with his aggravating host.

"Mr. Inskip, *you* are making one of the little ones of my flock a cause of offence to the whole community."

"Talk English," Hugh Inskip interposed rather irritably.

Mr. Ponsonby felt that he had done all in his power tactfully to present the case. He had neither the time nor the temper indefinitely to continue this fencing. He took one more sip of his cider, and cleared his throat.

"I will endeavour to make myself perfectly plain," he said. "I am here to-night, sir, to beg you to consider the criminal selfishness of ruining the reputation of a young and foolish girl."

His voice rang through the room. He was very indignant and not a little perturbed. What would this eccentric person do? Mr. Ponsonby was no coward, and he clenched his fists and stiffened his back, ready for any sudden onslaught that his host might offer him.

Hugh Inskip, however, remained perfectly silent. For one moment his heavy dark eyes lit up with a flame, the significance of which Mr. Ponsonby could not determine. But he spoke no word, merely stroked his beard with a hand that trembled slightly.

"Miss Davenant has no mother," the curate continued. He felt vaguely uncomfortable. He wished

this extraordinary man would do something. This silence under direct attack was singularly baffling.

"These moorland walks alone with you night after night are, from every point of view, undesirable. The village is, even now, a hot-bed of scandal."

Then Hugh Inskip spoke, and his voice was so little above a whisper that Mr. Ponsonby had to strain his ears to catch it.

"Is this what you came to say?"

"I came to tell you that you are making Miss Davenant the talk of the countryside."

Mr. Ponsonby's searching eyes never left his host's face. With a man so silent as was Hugh Inskip it was necessary to watch for a message other than the spoken.

The man was leaning forward in his chair, chin in hand, his impenetrable eyes gazing past Mr. Ponsonby and out of the window, where, half-clothed in night's purple shadow, could be seen the rolling vista of moorland. As the curate spoke and watched he saw a fleeting expression creep about the long, thin face. Was it regret? Was it defiance? Was it . . . love? He could not tell.

Inskip rose and crossed over to the window, and leaned out, his hands raised to the framework above his head. Mr. Ponsonby, that searching delineator of man's soul, could make nothing of the back of a sleek black head, rather high shoulders, and the twinkling vision of an instep in a crimson silk sock.

Then the man turned round . . . and his face was transformed. There was that in the eyes which each man seeing recognises; that touch of kinship which,

from the beginning, man has shared with all created things.

Mr. Ponsonby's own eyes met it and flinched for a second: he was instinctively and inherently a celibate. Therefore he was not connoisseur enough to recognise something which was born in reverence, and not in passion—something in the strong dark face that was clothed in gentleness and tender reserve.

Hugh Inskip came towards him, hand outstretched. Mr. Ponsonby felt his own caught and wrung—more tightly than was pleasant.

"Thank you," said a quiet voice. "Thank you very, very much."

Though Mr. Ponsonby was aware that his own conduct was deserving of praise, it yet caused him a qualm of surprise to find it receiving its well-merited reward. During his three years' work in this very upsetting parish he had invariably found his conscientious efforts at correction submitted to with churlish unwillingness. He never remembered having been thanked for good advice before. He looked half doubtfully at the man who held his hand so tightly, but, though Hugh Inskip's dark face was still alight, the light was not of irony.

"I am glad you take my well-meant advice this way," he said, and, try as he might, there was a tinge of surprise in his voice.

"I am very, very grateful."

"Of course," said the curate, "as a man of the world I know how easily these things happen—a passing flirtation, a pretty girl, an evening *rendezvous*. Nothing wrong, nothing worse than indiscreet. But when the

girl has no mother, and when there is the prestige of the rectory, one cannot be too careful."

Mr. Inskip was fidgetting throughout this speech, and appeared to find a difficulty in not interrupting. When the curate's slow and incisive voice ended he broke forth impetuously:

"Pretty girl—passing flirtation—be hanged!"

Mr. Ponsonby looked coldly at him.

"There is no earthly reason," continued the indignant voice, "why I should explain my private affairs to a man who can form the views you have just expressed, but I will tell you that I have asked Miss Davenant twice to do me the honour to become my wife."

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Ponsonby, stiffly. "I had no idea——"

"She—she only puts me off. I mean to venture a third time."

Mr. Ponsonby inclined his head. His own opinion was that his rector's daughter deserved to have her ears boxed.

"I—I mean to venture again to-night."

The curate glanced at the clock—expressively.

"It is not yet ten. I often stroll on the moors in the moonlight. So—so does she. If I meet her to-night, and I think I shall, I mean to ask her once more, for the third and last time. If she refuse, I shall leave here to-morrow, and not return."

Mr. Ponsonby could only look his amazement. Privately he thought that no more suitable partner could Miss Davenant ever hope to find than this extra-

ordinary man, with his changeable moods, his table of dolls, and his general eccentricity.

He picked up his soft felt hat. "Then I will say good evening." And he put out his hand.

It was grasped more warmly than before. The long, inscrutable face—the face that Mr. Ponsonby faintly distrusted (because it was so un-English), was again kindled with an emotion which he could not entirely fathom. "I care as little for your damnable villagers' gossip as you do," said Inskip, and the unconscious coupling of himself with the curate pleased the latter so much that he forgave the emphatic language. "But if—if you think it may pain *her*—do *her* harm, stamp on it, will you? Pick out the ringleaders and burn 'em at the stake, duck 'em in the pig-trough—what does one do with these toads, eh?"

Mr. Ponsonby by now was entirely acclimatised to any eccentricity in word or action of this remarkable man. He smiled kindly at him as he again bid farewell.

"Next Sunday evening," said he, "I shall preach a sermon on scandal."

And already his face glowed in anticipation. For he could be very terrible.

The door closed. The front-door slammed. Inskip heard the clinch-clinch of Mr. Ponsonby's retreating footsteps on the gravel. He crossed to the window, and leaned out. Before him and above him was the infinite soft blackness of night; in the velvet gloom of the sky spun a little star. He looked up at it. It was Spika—that unconscious chaperon of himself and her only a week ago.

His heart was throbbing unbearably; within it had been born, out of due time, man's greatest joy—man's greatest sorrow. Love comes in many forms, and in many disguises. To Hugh Inskip that night Love had approached in the most insidious of her disguises—and the most alluring. She had flung herself, unarmed and helpless, at his finest side—his mental side. His visionary self (and it was his truest self), awoke to flame at a little picture conjured up by a hard voice. "*She has no mother.*"

His mind travelled to a girl with a gentle voice, and a white face of youth and innocence. He thought of the unconsciousness of evil that had landed her in the slough of village gossip.

. . . And now night was calling to his other self; and it, too, was a fine self. It cried within him for the right to protect, for the right to hold, for the right to *touch*. . . .

He stood motionless, drinking in the pungent air. The silvery tones of the hall-clock chimed ten. It was the hour of their *rendezvous*—a *rendezvous* that was never arranged, and that never failed to take place. She would be there, and he knew it; yet he lingered, tasting that supremest joy of all visionaries—the joy of anticipation.

He had never spoken to her one word of love—how would she receive it? She had always kept her white mantle of a gentle aloofness—how would she accept the passion-coloured vestments of love's ritual? Inskip turned from the window and paced the room.

It was ten minutes later when he vaulted lightly through the casement and crossed the lawn. And

even then he hesitated. The vision was so beautiful he could not bear to make it incarnate. He had drunk deeply of the bitter dregs of the cup of disillusionment already; he knew that the man is a fool who wilfully wastes one precious moment of a beautiful dream.

The moon had burst from beneath a black cloud as he reached the moor, and spread a light silver carpet over the swarthy shadows. The old Roman wall stood out sharply silhouetted against a background of stubby gorse-bushes. . . . Against it was leaning a girl in a white gown over which was thrown a rose-pink cloak.

"The colour of love," the man murmured to himself.

Iris came towards him, smiling gently. The man gazed at her with eyes which had never seen her before—or so it seemed to him. The little sensitive face, with its quiet beauty; the eyes which held that curious suggestion of a caged soul; the mouth which had a hint of both passion and restraint; the soft hair that fell in childish waves over the low forehead.

He took both her hands in his. He had never touched her before, and for one second he was swept away in the sea of his own emotions—passionate, tender, enchanting. . . . Then he looked at her—and *knew*. The girl's face was dyed by a wave of crimson. It crept slowly from her cheeks to her forehead and to the roots of her hair.

"*Iris*," the man whispered, below his breath, "*Iris*."

He dropped the soft little hands, and, slipping his arm through hers, drew her towards the low stone wall. . . . And again he had that overwhelming desire

to be alone ; loneliness and love on the moor, and this soft, caressing, silvery night. With all his heart he craved that, for a minute or two of exquisite emotion, he might be allowed to be silent.

Whether Iris understood or not (and she probably did, for love has all the senses save common sense), she, too, was silent, her face buried in her hands, her head bowed. The man saw she was trembling from head to foot, and an unutterable tenderness chased away all other desire. He put his arm round her, and drew her to him.

"Does this mean you love me?" he asked, and his voice sounded in his ears like a stranger's.

"I have loved you all my life : I have wanted you all my life."

"I'm a nervy, irritable fellow, Iris. I shall worry the life out of you."

"I want my life to be worried out of me—by you."

"There are moments when I hate all the world—when I feel I must be alone, or go mad. What does my wife do then?"

"You will never feel that with your wife."

And the girl believed she spoke the truth ; but cynical little Spika caught Hugh Inskip's eye at that moment, and he could almost have sworn she winked. He moved irritably.

"Iris, they tell me my temper is impossible."

"Perhaps you will beat me at times, but I shall love you."

He smiled at her tenderly—all irritation gone. What could one say to this adorable child? And yet his native honesty compelled him.

"I'm a sort of a journalist, kiddie. And they say all journalists should marry, but no one should marry a journalist. We're an untameable lot."

"I do not want to *tame* you."

"I hope I shall be kind to you," said Mr. Inskip. "I know little of women—they are such gentle creatures, a word hurts them."

"But you love me—that will teach you."

"Love can be brutal, you know."

The girl was silent. For one wild moment she hoped that his *would* be brutal. She could imagine nothing more permanently satisfying than to be caught up in his arms and kissed with hot, heroic love; nothing more disturbing and unrestful than that he should keep her at a distance. Yet she could not tell him this. She had created the illusion of a gentle aloofness—he had loved the illusion, not knowing it from the reality. The perplexing part was that she, herself, hardly knew the illusory from the real Iris.

Hugh Inskip glanced at his watch, and frowned. "It is hateful to say it, but it is time you went home," he remarked. "Will your father have gone to bed?"

"No. He will be out in the garden watching the moon through his telescope."

"Then I can speak to him to-night. Come along."

He put his arm through hers. They walked back to the rectory in an unbroken silence; each intensely happy. He bid her good-night at the hall door, put his hand on her shoulder, looked long and rather hungrily into her eyes, then turned away abruptly, and followed the narrow path that led to the rose-garden and his prospective father-in-law.

Iris ran upstairs to her white bedroom, locked the door, and flung herself on the bed. She was very, very happy—happier than she had ever been in her life. But she wished with all her heart he had kissed her.

CHAPTER VI

MR. PONSONBY'S sermon was indeed terrible. Never had he risen to such heights of rhetoric—never would he rise again. With his tongue he lashed the perforce passive congregation till, to a man, it squirmed in its seat. If the breath of scandal were ever wafted through the village in the future it would be at its own peril. Perhaps his sublimest touch was towards the end of his peroration, for, warmed by his magnificent subject, and inspired by the awed attention of his listeners, he gave vent to this sublime and broad-minded exhortation:

"You and I, my brothers, living in this quiet and peaceful village, have many advantages and few temptations. What can we understand of the artistic temperament, or of the Bohemian personality? Let us never judge the one or the other. I assure you, as one who knows of what he is speaking, that under the eccentric personality that jars upon our more cultured taste, there is often much to admire, much, even, to emulate."

He descended the pulpit steps with an unusual flush on his cheeks. That broad-minded touch at the end of his sermon had pleased him not a little. He felt that his rector, whose latitudinarianism was really lamentable, would also be pleased; and he alluded to

it rather dexterously in the vestry when they were counting the collection.

"Of course, one can do so little in a thirty-five minutes' discourse," he said, regretfully, "but if I have drilled an open mind into some of these village yokels I have not altogether failed."

"Scandal," said Paul Davenant slowly, "does infinitely more harm to the soul of the scandal-monger than to his victim."

Mr. Ponsonby pressed his thin lips together, and walked away in much annoyance. That was a point he had not dwelt upon in his sermon, and he thought it extremely unpleasant of his rector to allude to it.

He had had an exceptionally energetic week, having taken very much to heart Mr. Inskip's final plea to him (for a plea he took it to be). On the Wednesday morning Miss Davenant's engagement was communicated by himself in an off-hand manner to the post-mistress as he bought stamps at the village shop.

"It is only now made public," he said, tactfully, with a smile for which he hoped he might be forgiven.

The seed thus sown bore excellent fruit. The affection between Mrs. Stair's Russian-looking guest and the rector's daughter was spoken of as having existed since her school and his college days. "Poverty has been the obstacle." "No, her father thought her too young." "No, she would not leave her father, that was the real reason."

And so it remained until an enterprising young housemaid with a taste for fiction, which had recently been inflamed by seeing in a much-read journal a letter of hers protesting against the Insurance Bill,

gave out that the engagement would have been announced long ago if Miss Iris would only have consented to become a member of the Greek Church.

"But you have to cuss your former religion, and that she *won't* do," said the damsel.

Paul Davenant did not speak to Iris of her engagement until two days after he had given his consent. Then he came into the drawing-room before dinner—an old, bent figure, with a beautiful, cultured face, and silvery hair. His daughter was sitting in the twilight, playing an anthem on the piano—very riotously.

He stood behind her, and looked down on her fair head, and smiled.

"My dear," said he, "how wicked you make that sound." Then he put out a gentle old hand, and touched her cheek. "I want you to be very, very happy," he added.

The girl played a wrong note. Then she turned and kissed him.

"I love Hugh Inskip with all my heart," she said. Then she closed the piano. "Oh, I want *so much* to be happy!" she cried.

"Keep on loving, then," said the old man. "No one who loves can ever be really unhappy."

"Is that so, father?"

"It is the primary axiom of life."

"Hugh and I are so different; sometimes I have a panic lest we should quarrel."

"Your mother and I were as different as two human beings could possibly be. Yet the bond of love made

our union so complete that, even now, I constantly hear her voice."

"I wish *I* were different," said the girl. "I wish I didn't——" She stopped for fully a minute. "I wish I didn't *pose* so much."

She looked up at her father. He was smiling, half sadly, but there was no surprise on his face. She flushed crimson.

"Did you know I posed?"

"Yes."

"Did you know I wasn't—straightforward?"

"Yes," said the old man, and in his voice there was a great compassion.

"That I—told lies?"

There was a short silence. Paul Davenant crossed to the fireplace, and arranged a screen. Then he spoke, but his face was turned away from his daughter.

"Lies is a cruel, brutal word to use. You have that fatal gift of imagination which can be man's greatest blessing and his greatest curse."

"That sermon of yours—months ago—did you mean *me* to learn a lesson from it?"

The old man smiled at her. "I thought it would do no harm, if you did."

"Suppose Hugh discovers my failing and hates me?"

"Love will teach him to understand; and love will teach you to learn." He was going quietly out of the room as he spoke, but his daughter put out a restraining hand.

"Father, how is it *you* understand so?"

A shadow crossed the old man's face for a moment. Then he smiled at her, half-amusedly, half-sadly.

"Your mother," said he, "was very like what you are now when I married her. I loved her so much that I *understood*; she loved me so much that *she* understood. She was an actress and a dancer, as you know; for all her sweet nature there was an element of unreality. . . . it even touched her love. But love triumphed."

He closed the door as he spoke.

The marriage had been definitely fixed for the beginning of November, which was but six weeks hence. The future bride, to her secret dismay, found herself submerged in that extraordinarily perplexing item—a trousseau, and liking it.

"Why are women so *small*?" she thought more than once. "Here am I puzzling my brain over *peignoirs*, when I might be writing long letters to Hugh." (For Mr. Inskip had been called to town on urgent business.)

Mrs. Hilyard, to whom this remark was made, looked at her with a pitying smile.

"A woman can get more satisfaction out of one *peignoir* than from many husbands," she said with one of her flashes of strange, odd humour.

"You say very cynical things, Mrs. Hilyard."

"When your *peignoir* is soiled you can send it to the wash."

"They clean things much more satisfactorily," Iris observed.

"Yes, they do. All the little crimps and frills will

be as good as new. Of what help could you say the same in a year?"

"I do not want my husband to be in crimps and frills."

"You say that," said the older woman, "because you are very young. Every wife loves the crimps and frills of matrimony."

"What do you mean exactly by crimps and frills?"

"I mean an indulgent nature that easily forgives the weakness of others, and a tolerant affection that can put up with a good deal," said Mrs. Hilyard, who was very indignant and grief-stricken because her son had left abruptly for the continent on hearing of the Inskip-Davenant engagement.

An indulgent nature: a tolerant affection—was that really the ideal of marriage held by women? Iris, in her own heart, secretly believe it might be. How different then, her own! She thought of the nights on the moor, Hugh's dark and inscrutable face, his moodiness, her own strange moods which led her so often whither she would not go. What could indulgence and tolerance give her in exchange for that wild pain at her heart when Inskip first kissed her?

He seemed far more present with her, far more a part of herself, now that he had gone. She could feel his touch on her hair very distinctly; hear his voice, which was slow and lazy; see long white fingers caressing a short black beard; hold imaginary silences with him—for Inskip had surely been the most silent lover that ever loved. Once she had spoken to him half-quizzically about it. He had stopped abruptly (they were on the moor), and swung her round

by the shoulders, looking deep into her eyes. What she saw in his frightened, even while it fascinated her.

"Your father can tell you," he had said, "that once there was a man who had a devil—but it was *dumb*."

Did she want to understand him? With all her heart she longed to, sometimes; and at other times she knew that if she understood him he would lose for her half his charm. And always she craved that he should *not* understand her: always she held that intangible veil between them. She wanted him to love her; she wanted him to want her; but, above all, she wanted him to be *interested* in her.

And for this—or so her immature experience cried out—there must be the veil, the suggestion of many things, the uncertainty of all things. She had never known, and could never understand, that in some natures (and her lover possessed one of those natures) the passion for analysis is so acute that a veil can act as an irritant—that to some men a naked soul is infinitely more attractive than a beautiful body.

Inskip, to the very core of his being, was an analyst: he had the profoundest of all possible indifferences for the outward and visible sign, and saw nothing sacramental in it at all. And he had the virtue characteristic of the defect. That is—he, more often than most men, grasped with an acumen that was almost inhuman, and quite uncanny, the fundamental quality, the "inward and spiritual grace." His mind had a laborious trick of following the line of most resistance; he employed no scouts, and he would have scorned to act on information he had not acquired himself.

Iris, to him at that time, was a pleasant mystery—

mysterious with all the strange interest of a sex of which he was almost totally ignorant. Also the love which had come so secretly and so fervently into his life was, then at any rate, enough to fill it and leave no vacancy for problems. But, if problem there were to be, Hugh would have found it, not in the obvious little affectations, not in the girlish attempts at profundities, but in the spirit underlying each—the spirit crying and craving through a dun-coloured world for happiness. If Iris could have realised the link it would have been between her lover and herself, she would have flung herself into his arms in a passion of sincerity, crying, "Hugh, I wanted happiness at any cost!"

For there is nothing mean in realities; though the real may become despicable when it has hidden itself under its loveliest garment, and the primitive may revolt one's soul when it drapes a mantle of culture over its nakedness. There is a passion for sincerity in the methods of the Creator Himself Whose first recorded words are: "Let there be light"; and Whose final and devastating intention is portrayed for us in His own most terrible hint: "For there is nothing secret that shall not be revealed."

Iris, since her new-found happiness, had understudied neither Drefus, Marconi, nor Margaret Stair, but had employed herself in the much healthier occupation of thinking how lovely it would be to be Mrs. Hugh Dalziel Inskip, and to live in a flat in London.

Inskip had demurred at first at the idea of taking his young wife to live in town.

She had talked to him in so enraptured a language of the beauties of "God's country" (Inskip had never heard the phrase before on a girl's lips, and was enormously impressed), and had told him so many times that her love for the moors was a part of her very soul, that he determined he could never take so pure a flower away from its native soil—though how he was himself to live in a dull little village and continue his work he failed to see.

The matter was simplified by Iris, in one terrified moment of intuition, seeing into what a disastrous unselfishness she was pushing him. Immediately she altered her tactics. Her nervousness of what mad quixotism he might attempt made her tell the truth—just as her nervousness of himself had often made her conceal it.

"I am simply dying to live in London," she told him.

The truth certainly had an inspiring effect on Hugh just then. He saw his work progressing along its destined way, and he saw his dear little bride-elect all a-quiver with excitement at the prospect of the unknown delights of the metropolis. He thought her girlish ingenuousness simply delightful.

He kissed her.

He was always afraid of wearying her with his caresses, a fear which was born in his own undying belief in the spirituality of all good women's minds, and nurtured by Iris's own attitude of a gentle evasiveness whenever he had a momentary fit of excitement.

To the girl, Hugh's first kiss, and, after that, every one of his all-too-rare kisses, was a sort of heaven on

earth—that delectable, incredible world where mere humans are permitted the felicity of choosing their own happiness. She could have died, then and there, with the pure joy of it.

And that was why she immediately begged him to tell her about Fleet Street.

Poor Hugh, covered with confusion, entirely devoid of that sacramental nature that would have helped him, called himself inwardly a coarse, low brute, and immediately put, and kept, his little bride-elect on a pedestal. Which was an all-sufficient punishment to the maiden for her insincerity. She found it very cold, and would much prefer to have been in her lover's arms.

He did not encourage her rhapsodies over country and the moors—probably because Iris, after her terror that he might elect to live amongst them, was less enthusiastic in her pæans of praise, and her quieter rhapsodies now lacked verisimilitude. But he developed an extraordinary interest in her childhood; he asked the most puzzling and persistent questions; he wanted to know everything there was to know about it, and many things there were not to know—because Iris herself was unaware of them.

"You must have been the dearest, quaintest little soul on earth," he said. "Tell me everything you can possibly remember. Begin at *six* and take your time, working backwards. That is the way all children's stories should have been written."

Here, had she but known it, was Iris's great opportunity. She had never had such an auditor as Hugh would have made. She would never have such

another. But Miss Davenant's love was not leading her to the Palace of Truth, but to the Hill of Difficulty. If she had told Mr. Inskip that, at the age of seven, she had killed a baby; that burglars in the attics and long-lost sisters in the garrets were mere everyday factors of her existence; he would have been ready to eat her then and there—pedestal or no pedestal.

But poor little Iris, puzzled to death over what to say to him that should keep alive the interest she saw burning so brightly in his eyes, stumbled blindly up her Difficult Hill.

"I was always a dreamy child," she told her lover, "and very fond of reading biographies. I had a passion for botany, too, I remember, and I used to collect and press wild flowers. I have a book of them still. Shall I show them to you?"

"Some other day, dear," he said hastily, "some other day."

She was extremely observant, and had noticed (as indeed no one could have helped doing) the light die out of Inskip's curious eyes. She wondered, with an almost passionate wonder, what was wrong. She came to the conclusion that he did not like botany—or perhaps he loved flowers so much that he could not bear to see them pressed.

"It seems to me now," she said, dreamily, "a cruel thing to pluck flowers for the pleasure of dissecting them. But children are so unimaginative."

"Are they?" he asked. "Somehow I had thought they were a bundle of lovely and lovable illusions—that they hardly knew what was true and what was

false; not from foolishness, but from that almost divine belief that lovely things *must* be true."

He looked horribly disappointed. Again Iris tried to comfort him.

"Would you like me to take you to the school on Sunday?" she asked him. "We have some dear little mites there. They are rather shy with strangers, but perhaps if you gave them some peppermints they would tell you about themselves. Is it for a book you are writing that you want to know?"

He told her hastily that it was not. And he did not seem enthusiastic about stimulating with peppermints and then rifling the mind of the Sunday scholar.

"Parochial matters are excellent," he said. "But they are not for me."

"Nor for me, neither," Iris interposed, hastily. "Mr. Ponsonby nearly drives me wild."

But, to her intense surprise, he would not hear a word against the curate.

"Ponsonby's one of the best," he assured his astonished fiancée, "one of the best. I am under an eternal debt of——" he stammered, then continued, rather lamely, "that is to say, he helped me enormously with my play the other night when he just dropped in for a chat and a smoke."

This, indeed, was seeing Charles Edward in a new and dazzling light. Iris could only gasp her amazement and say it was time she went home.

They had few talks more intimate than these before Inskip left for town to see about the furnishing of the flat he had taken in Buckingham Gate.

He was to return on Wednesday. The shooting-

party at the Hall had dispersed, and he was going to stay at the rectory as Mr. Davenant's guest. Late on Tuesday Iris received a little note, written on mauve paper, in a large and decided handwriting. "Won't you come and see me to-morrow on your way to the station. I am alone and very mopey.—Margaret Stair."

Iris felt a twinge of nervousness as she walked up the gravel drive leading to the medieval door of the Hall at four o'clock the following afternoon. On the few occasions when she had spoken to Mrs. Stair she had been completely mystified, and completely fascinated. For so great an actress Margaret was a marvellously beautiful woman; as everyone else did, Miss Davenant felt the spell of her bewitching, dangerously attractive eyes.

She was shown into an octagon-shaped room with an unusually high ceiling. It was full of golden chrysanthemums, and their faint, delightful odour greeted her on the threshold. The walls were hung with black velvet—a craze that Mrs. Stair had herself introduced to London that autumn. On the floor was a self-toned square of velvety carpet of a deep orange hue. Iris looked round in amazement. It was unlike any room she had ever seen, and she hardly knew whether violently to like or dislike it. But as a background for a beautiful woman it was, of course, unique, and as such she supposed it had been designed.

. . . And this was the room that Inskip must know so well—the intimate boudoir of the hostess to whom he was bound by a tie which she had never quite

been able to fathom. His photograph, in a golden frame, stood on a tall gold easel in the angle of the room by the sofa—the only photograph the room contained. Iris crossed over to look at it. It was very like him: enigmatical, frank, bored, eager, and a hundred other contradictory things.

The door opened gently, and she turned round hastily. Margaret Stair, leaning heavily on her stick, was entering, a smile of welcome on her face, her left hand outstretched. She wore a tea-gown of deep-tinted lace, over which was a tunic of flame-coloured Chinese silk. In one swift second Iris realised that now the whole setting of the room made the one perfect frame for this perfect picture. Only she herself, in her country frock of quiet grey, was a blur on the whole.

The thought was a pin prick, though ever so slight; then she put out her right hand instinctively, and Mrs. Stair, with a little deprecatory smile, shook it with her left. The girl suddenly felt awkward and ashamed.

"Let me pull up a chair for you," she said diffidently: again to be rebuffed—though very gently.

"Thank you, but I cannot sit. I am a helpless old log," said Mrs. Stair, with that tone in her voice which had brought tears to the eyes of thousands of her audience in the days of her triumphs, and she limped over to a low couch which was drawn up underneath Hugh Inskip's photograph.

Anything less like an *old log* could hardly be imagined than this woman with her air of undying youth, her vivid southern face with the dark and velvety eyes—eyes upon the surface of which there

was no play of light, the movement rather being from below, as from some subterranean spring of passion chastened by humour, and humour warmed by passion. Iris, sitting down rather abruptly on a high-backed, spindle-legged chair, felt those eyes watching her with an expression she could not fathom. Was it a lazy amusement? Had it a speculative gleam? Or was it a real and warm interest? She could not tell.

An Indian manservant brought in the tea-things, and arranged them round his mistress's couch—a low Turkish stool of blackest carved oak, on it a copper tray with china of brightest blue, a little gold toast-rack, a dish of lemons, and a tall vase of bronze chrysanthemums. Again Iris saw the exquisite colour-scheme of the hostess, the room, and all its appointments, and felt herself a foreigner in it.

"Will you take milk—or lemon?" asked the slow, lazy voice.

"Milk, please," said the foreigner.

"Lemon has a wonderfully stimulating effect, you know."

"But I don't particularly want to be stimulated now, thank you."

A soft laugh came from under the sofa-rug. "Of course you don't. Are you not going to have the most powerful of all pick-me-ups in an hour? Hughie is more effective than many lemons."

"I don't think I should compare—Mr. Inskip—to a lemon."

It was delivered skilfully enough, but the beautiful face opposite showed no sign of disconcertion. Mrs.

Stair, ate a minute sandwich meditatively, and looked pleasantly at her guest.

"You are marrying the dearest boy on earth. Did you know I've been his friend for over seven years?"

"He has never mentioned that fact to me."

"That is because he has so many more interesting things to talk to you about. But we have been pals for over seven years. Do you know what that means?"

Iris stiffened. "I *beg* your pardon?"

"It means I am entitled to poke his fire."

The gentle malice was delivered quite as skilfully as the more direct snub. Iris, conscious of it, crimsoned painfully. She had been made to feel a fool.

"Only, you see, I can't poke fires now—or at any rate poke them vigorously." The lovely voice had again that tone in it which no man or woman ever would be able to hear unmoved. The girl in the grey frock crossed over to the tea-tray, deposited her empty cup, pulled a footstool from under the sofa, and sat down at her hostess's feet.

"You must come and poke our fires in London for us. But I don't think we shall need a very bright one where you are. You would make the dreariest room radiant."

"You are very kind."

"I mean what I say."

"And may I still call him Hughie?"

"You may call me Iris, too—if you will."

Mrs. Stair picked up a tiny pair of gold sugar-tongs, and selected a lump from the crystal basin.

"Co-ee, co-ee, co-ee," she called.

There was a whirr of wings, a flash of sulphur plumage, and a brightly-coloured cockatoo flew from an open cage, caught at the sugar fiercely, and returned whither it came. For one moment Miss Davenant wondered if this were her hostess's gentle way of recreating an atmosphere too charged with electricity.

"Hughie hates that bird," said Mrs. Stair lazily. "He says it is the serpent in the Eden of this room."

"Why?"

Mrs. Stair shook her head, and laughed lightly. "One can't always explain the dear boy's subtleties, but I believe Coee's conversational powers are at times too excessive." She paused a moment; her dark, expressive eyes wandered slowly over the fair face beside her—"Of course, you have noticed Hughie's passion for silence?"

"Yes."

"I wonder," mused Mrs. Stair, "how he would assimilate with a wife who hadn't noticed it."

"How could she help noticing it—if she loved him?"

"Is not love blind?"

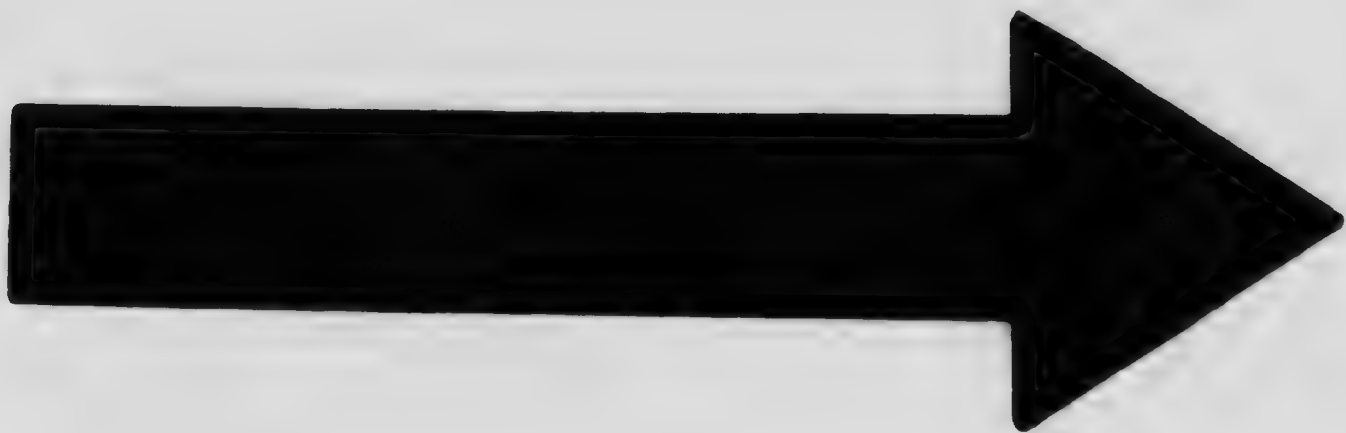
"Blind to faults—not to character."

"Hughie isn't a character—he's a talent."

"Then a talent is the most fascinating thing in the world."

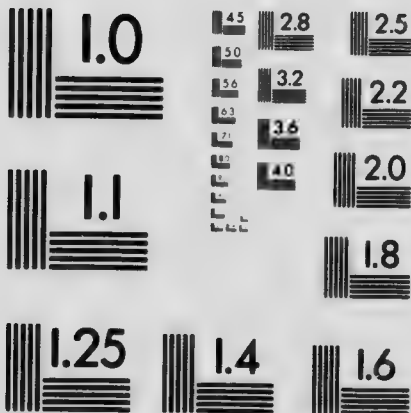
The older woman patted Iris gently on the shoulder. "You dear little soul. I love to hear you talk."

Was there a hint of patronage in the voice? The girl could not be quite certain. She only knew that the vague pain in her heart stirred again, like a wounded bird.



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The next moment, however, Mrs. Stair, her voice full and ardent, with a ring of reality in it (or was it what passes on the stage as reality?), leaned forward, her chin in her hand.

"Oh," she cried. "I *want* you two to be happy!"

"That is very good of you."

"Very impertinent, you mean."

"How can you suggest I should think you impertinent?"

"You see, it is like this—when one wants a thing very much one loses sight of the little hindrances. I want you and my best friend to have a very, very happy life. And because that wish of mine is so real and so sincere I am treading on all your prejudices—making you think me tactless."

"What does it matter what I think? But I *don't* think you tactless."

Mrs. Stair turned with her customary languid grace, and switched on the light of an electric lamp that stood high on the floor behind her. It had a deep golden shade, and the tawny radiance fell softly on the little brass tea-tray, the bronze chrysanthemums, and her glowing face.

"His most lovable quality is his childlikeness."

"*Childish!* Hugh childish!"

"I said childlike. He's a perfect baby."

(And this of her god! Iris felt some difficulty in restraining her indignation. How little this woman really knew—in spite of the seven years' friendship.)

"He's the cleverest, most brilliant man I know, but he's a perfect baby in some ways."

"I have never known these *perfect babies*. Tell me what you mean."

"For instance—he has an extraordinarily enthusiastic belief in the uprightness of women."

"And is this belief shared by babies?"

Mrs. Stair ignored the interruption. "He doesn't understand how the best of women are a little insincere."

"Have you not been able to teach him this in seven years?" The moment after the words were uttered Iris wished them recalled, but her hostess showed neither annoyance nor confusion. Indeed, she smiled.

"That is why we have been friends for seven years," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"I have ninety-nine faults, but I have one virtue. I am sincere."

"Oh?"

"So Hughie puts up with me for that reason."

"Oh?"

"If I deceived him, I believe he would never forgive me."

"Indeed?"

"He would be courteous, because I am a cripple—but nothing more."

"Is that so?"

"And that's why I speak of his childlikeness. Have you not noticed the very same attitude of mind in a little boy or girl? The rock on which they build their infant church is their parents' integrity. Watch their little faces when the foundation of that church first

quavers. I don't know of any agnosticism so heart-breaking as the dawning agnosticism of childhood."

"Why do you talk to me like this?"

"I think—because I like you very much."

It was said in Margaret Stair's low and caressing voice, and with her characteristic smile; a smile that began and ended in the dark and speaking eyes, hardly touching the muscles of the generous mouth, Iris could no more resist it than anybody else.

"I wonder why you risk annoying me," she said, "when you like me so very much?"

"Because you are worth it."

"You really think so?"

"Before my accident," said Mrs. Stair, "I was on the stage for nine years. I met all manner of men, and all manner of women. Every one of the plays I acted in was either written for me, or adapted temperamentally to suit me—when I say that I mean that in each case the heroine must have strong and rebellious characteristics—must be a fighter with life and destiny, either for good or evil. So I can affirm truthfully that, either vicariously or in reality, I have lived the lives of many women, and read the secrets of many men. And I have never known a man and a woman, the union of whom in marriage, has interested me so much as has yours with Hughie."

Iris walked slowly down the short drive, bordered on either side by silver beeches that quivered in the light breeze. Evening's violet shadows were creeping over the sky, blotting out the sunset's carnation-red. There was a chill in the air—and a forboding dark-

ness. After the brilliant, vivid, unusual room, with its ever-present black and orange and gold the twilight gloom held a menace.

What had Life in store for her? What was hidden for her behind that enigmatic sky? What would to-morrow, what would all the to-morrows bring?

Would it bring her love? Love was surging riotously round her heart at that moment, a love that ached to have her splendid, impulsive, moody lover wholly hers; to keep him against all the world, and to keep him always.

Would it give her life? Unconsciously she slackened her footsteps, and then stood still, gazing down on the length of valley spread beneath her feet. It looked peaceful and prosperous—just as it always did—just as it always would do. In the shadowy distance was the low white house where she had been born, where she had spent nineteen years; years of such apparent peace, and of such real turbulence. She could see the open oriel window of her bedroom round which circled a necklace of Gloire de Dijon roses—how often had they not looked in gentle mockery of a girl pacing to and fro like a caged prisoner longing for escape? She could see a blur of inky trees at the garden's furthest limit. It was called by the gardener the wilderness, for it had no gravel paths, and no flower-beds, and dandelions and wild hyacinths had intertwined their stems and heads in a riot of disordered life. How it, too, had mocked her with its counterfeit of freedom—a freedom which was overlooked by the servants' bedroom windows, and three neighbouring cottages!

Would it bring her peace? To that question alone her heart made answer. If prescience meant anything, it was not peace that was coming to her with her lover. If a future awaited her of calm assurance, of a mutual and unchangeable love, it had not yet cast its shadow before.

The station stood on the edge of the moor. As Iris turned into it this evening, the familiar smell of tar and railway-smoke greeted her. She had always liked the little place, the shining steel of the lines, the blackened sleepers, the tall white signal-posts—for her they had invariably signified the Way Out.

Hugh's train was late. The station-master, immensely busy over one portmanteau and two bundles on a barrow, told her it was overdue by seven minutes at Leamington.

She was glad. She would not willingly have forgone one of those minutes, or have squandered one iota of the pleasures of anticipation.

Nobody was there but herself. She stood at the end of the platform, and watched the shining rails. To her imagination it seemed as if her heart were pulling them, bringing with each beating pulse her lover nearer home. She wondered if he, ten miles away, were feeling the same; if the tense longing she had were projected over the distance till it brought his heart a message from her own.

Her imagination brooded over the subject. They were to be married now in only a few weeks. Perhaps she would never again be waiting for his train just

like this ; never again have this wonderful sensation, half-pain, half-pleasure. She could not picture a time when excitement would be lulled into passivity, a time when custom should have staled the infinite variety of love. In her heart she knew there never would come such a time for her. . . . But for him? Could she hope to hold so mercurial a temperament?

There was a sharp click a few yards away. It was the falling signal of the great freight train. The station-master hastened from his little office, calling "Scotch Express"; a small boy with a tray of papers and sweets suddenly appeared, and prepared to cry his wares. A long semi-circle of brilliant lights coiled round a curve in the line, like a serpent. Iris, with flushed cheeks and happy eyes, turned to face it as it drew alongside the shallow platform.

Inskip was the only passenger to get out. For one moment he stood still, looking. Then across his dark face chased a sudden radiance. It was not all love, it was not all tenderness ; it was a compound of the two. Standing in that grey half-light, in her grey dress, there was a touch of forlornness in the girl's appearance which even her eyes could not dispel. Inskip strode forward, put two hands on her shoulders, and looked down into her face.

"It's *good* to see you again my—darling," he said, simply.

He did not kiss her. She knew he was the last man on earth to profane a kiss by offering it just then. He gave directions to the station-master to send his portmanteau to the rectory, bought an evening

paper, glanced at it, threw it away, and then tucked her arm through his.

"Let's walk home," he said.

It was on the moor that he kissed her, holding her little face in his hands, and looking down into her eyes before he did so.

"Iris," he said, "I love you. I *love* you."

PART III—MR. AND MRS. INSKIP

CHAPTER 1

IT was some seven months later, on a warm April afternoon, that Margaret Stair, propped up by many cushions, lay on the couch in the boudoir of her little flat in Shaftesbury Avenue. The couch was drawn up to the window, which was prettily draped with soft gold curtains of Spanish brocade, tied with enormous bows. Margaret watched the shifting crowd with an interest which never failed.

It was a Wednesday afternoon: one of the most difficult afternoons for her to endure—though a Saturday afternoon was worse. It was on a Saturday that there was a bigger *queue* besieging the doors of the Lyric, the Globe, the Apollo, the Palace, and the countless other theatres in the vicinity. It was on a Saturday that she lay in torment, watching the eager crowd disappearing through the dark pit entry, counting the motor cars arriving, seeing men and women she knew so well walking in at the stage door with that indescribable tilt of the chin characteristic of the actor on guard. It was on a Saturday that she lay and watched the Avenue for three hours, every hour interminable, till the crowds burst forth again. First the talkative, Suburban pit, then the shrewd, Cockney gallery, then the owners of the carriages and motors, till the whole road was one seething mass of women, all with that same look on their faces—the look of having been in a world other than their own.

She had only been in town for a fortnight, and, with the exception of her doctor and a few of her stage friends, had seen nobody. Everyone was too busy; there were new plays nearly every night, new triumphs, new heartbreaks.

Her own play—the play that had been evolved on the spur of a desperate moment—seemed to have dissolved into thin air. Inskip had written a marvellously appealing first act—and then she had heard no more about it. She knew she had been tiresome over it; she had, for so many years, been the inspirer of the greatest of modern playwrights, a man with a genius for being tactful over the non-essential. Inskip belonged to a different type—or was it to no type at all? They had spent half-an-hour wrangling over the heroine's illusion to—a footstool! Then Inskip, rather flushed and dangerously polite, had said: "Good-morning, Margaret," and had left her, taking his first and only act with him.

It had all been mythical and vague—that was why now she regretted it. There was always such possibility in an unfinished thing. She would like to have seen Hugh's treatment of the great Act 3, at which he had hinted. With his passion for analysis he would probably have evolved a masterpiece of her own particular forte—the mental heroine: the woman who felt with her mind rather than her body.

"*Margaret Stair*," so had written a famous critic in a famous journal, "*has no stage tricks. Watching her intently one understands that stage tricks were designed for the salvation of others who are not Margaret Stairs. Who but she could keep an*

audience enthralled by her marvellous capacity for saying nothing and looking—everything? With one slow droop of her eye she can convey all that the Censor is created to destroy. (Thank heaven! no government yet has instituted a Censor for the mind.) Again, watching the emotions chase one another across her most expressive face, one sits in ecstasy—dreaming of the Utopian time when men and women will learn that their deepest and best, and their worst sides ought invariably to be silent.

"There is nothing in the stage-world of to-day quite like Mrs. Stair, sitting in a straight chair, gazing in front of her; love, hate, passion, regret, disillusionment, defiance, boredom—even religious ecstasy—following each other in on the open book of her face. There is nothing like the sensation one experiences when, after it all, she does open her mouth, she says, 'Bring me a cushion.'"

As she lay on the sofa that April afternoon Mrs. Stair thought of her embryo play with a very definite regret; and from the play her mind wandered to the author, and to the author's wife.

She had seen neither of the Inskips since their marriage, which had taken place very quietly in London six months ago. No one but the nearest relatives had been present at the ceremony. "The bride's fair beauty," she learned from a society journal, "was admirably suited by her travelling-gown of mole velvet, with exquisite gold embroideries. On her rose-colour marquise hat the same gold embroidery was repeated. She wore no jewels, but from her

girdle swung a long gold châtelaine—the gift of the famous actress, Mrs. Stair.”

She had had a charming letter of thanks from young Mrs. Inskip for the châtelaine; and one of Hugh's curiously individual notes of pleasure on the receipt of the Eastern smoking-cap she had sent him. She had torn up the one, but the other lay in a locked drawer—not without companions (in dissimilar handwriting).

It began to rain, and, almost simultaneously, the audience of a musical comedy in a theatre opposite disgorged from the big entrance. There was the screech of cab whistles, the patter of horses' feet, the hoots of motors, a sea of umbrellas and fussy women. Margaret watched amusedly.

Suddenly she saw a tall figure on the opposite side of the road; a man with a long, lean face, and a close-cropped black beard. Amongst a crowd of a million she would have known him as himself and none other by the way he carried his head. Evidently he wished to cross the road—a very difficult matter just then. Women surged round him, gesticulating wildly at taxis, waving passionate umbrellas at motor-buses—each and all alike of which were full.

Hugh Inskip, looking very bored, his long chin poked down on his chest more than usual, disengaged his coat-collar from the firm grip of a lady's umbrella, signalled a taxi, stepped on the footboard beside the chauffeur, spoke a lazy word, gave the man a coin, and in a second was across the road.

Margaret leaned forward. Was he coming to the Mansions, on the third floor of which was her flat?

Most assuredly he was. She could see his tall figure reflected in the window of the restaurant opposite. He was standing in the porch, scanning the names on the visiting cards in their neat little black frames.

She heard the low music of the lift, the clang of the sliding gate. A minute later the door was flung open.

"Mr. Inskip to see Mrs. Stair."

As he crossed the room towards her, Margaret looked at him with eager interest. Had the six months of marriage altered him—or not? The room was a short one, but before he had reached her outstretched hand she had recalled the fact that, if he were altered, it was assuredly not from his sphinx-like face that she would learn it.

"Hughie, I saw you swearing at a lady who hooked you with her umbrella."

"I swore in Russian. It sounded like a caramel."

"No, it didn't. She heard you, and went pink with indignation."

"Pink with indignation, forsooth!" cried Mr. Inskip, with some warmth. "She nearly poked my eye out."

"You get in people's way so. You're such a great big thing."

"It is bad form to look out of your window in London, Margaret. Have I not often told you of it?"

"Oh, Hughie, it's so nice to hear you talk again."

Mr. Inskip, under an inscrutable mask of apathy, had not been unobservant the last few minutes. As he entered the room in the soft twilight he noticed the despondent droop of the figure under the silk sofa-rug. As he sat down opposite Margaret he saw

the dark eyes were very bright, and that the beautiful mouth, even with its welcoming smile, had a hint of pathos, also that Margaret's hands—the most personal part of her—were restlessly clasping and unclasping each other.

He saw the crowds in the street below: the women carrying their programmes and their opera-glasses—the life, the excitement, and the glitter. He saw the beautiful woman on the couch watching it. For a moment his face altered—only to harden, however.

"There's not a show worth seeing in the four-mile radius," he said, casually. "Margaret, since you've left us, the drop has been terrific."

"You say that to comfort me—you know you do!"

"That is only partly true."

"It is very good of you; but I am like Rachael crying for her children."

"Who was she?" Mr. Inskip asked, with sudden interest.

"Never mind."

"You mean you don't know."

Margaret laughed, and the pathos vanished. Hugh Inskip gave a sudden deep breath.

"The only things that are paying now are musical comedies and freak turns," he said. "All your big-wig rivals are giving sketches in the music-halls."

"Let's talk of something else," said Mrs. Stair quickly, and she turned her face determinedly so that Inskip could not see it.

He was dragging a roll of manuscript from his coat-tail pocket as she spoke, and he did not seem to have

heard her. He held out a bundle of typed paper in a brown leather cover to her.

"It's unpolished as yet—but the bone and the blood and the marrow are there," he said.

"Why are you talking like a butcher in his sleep?" asked Mrs. Stair, but her face was illumined with a sudden flash of light.

"I've been wrestling with the brute for nearly nine months, and even now it's chaotic in parts; but it's wriggled itself into the medium of words at last."

"Hughie . . . is it the play?"

"Yes."

"And I thought you'd forgotten!"

She was turning over the leaves as she spoke. There was an absolute silence in the room for a long while, broken only by the flutter of manuscript. Mr. Inskip lit a cigarette and lay back in his chair, his eyes nearly closed, an expression half-quizzical, half-tender in them. Margaret's cheeks, usually so pale, were dyed a deep carnation red. She looked wonderfully young at that moment, almost a child.

The man's cigarette was finished, and another one three-quarters burned, before she turned to him with half a sigh—half a gasp.

"Oh Hughie! This third act!"

"Will it do?"

"It's magnificent. But I can never, never rise to it."

"Rot!" said Mr. Inskip.

Mrs. Stair was now reading the fourth and final act, and her expression had slightly altered. She turned back to re-read a page or so, then looked towards the man with a rather puzzled frown.

"I don't like the ending, somehow," she said.

"I shall not alter it," said he, blandly.

"Hughie, it's *tame*!"

"It's nothing of the sort. Goodness is never *tame*."

"But I'm a bad woman, and you've made me repent."

"The best thing you could possibly do, too."

"Oh Hughie, I *don't* like it. Make me commit suicide instead. They always do."

"The very reason why my heroine shan't. Margaret, unless you acquiesce, I take away my play."

"You don't know women a bit, Hughie, they don't repent when they're really bad."

"Repentance," said Mr. Inskip, "is an ecstasy that can only be enjoyed in its completeness by the really bad."

"By the really good, you mean."

"I am not out to make paradoxes. Margaret, will you play *Elöise*, or won't you?"

"Of course I'll play her. What a magnificent part you've given me—all but the last act."

"You want me to make you wholly bad, and I've made you wholly human."

"But are you sure it *is* human?"

"Listen to what Meredith has to say on that subject: 'This is our divine consolation: that Evil may be separated from Good, but Good cannot be separated from Evil. The Devil may, the Angel will not, be driven out from us. A truly good man is possible upon earth; a thoroughly bad man is not possible.'"

"But you've made the Angel so obvious," protested Mrs. Stair, who privately thought the Meredithian heroine a terrible person.

"What earthly reason can you or anyone else advance for an angel remaining sub-rosa?"

"It won't be a success, Hughie. And London is sick of artistic failures."

"If it's an artistic failure, the fault will lie with the interpreters and not the play."

To any woman save the one who heard it, Hugh Inskip's curt remark might have seemed both brutal and egoistical. Margaret Stair, though she was an actress first and a psychologist afterwards, understood enough to know that the man's words simply pointed to a boundless courage of his own convictions. She turned a pleading, protesting face to him.

"Hughie, when I killed myself—in that other play, you know, I sent all London dumb with horror."

"London is always struck dumb at the ghastly obvious."

"But think of the triumph I had."

"And for what, forsooth? For waiting in the wings, chattering with an understudy, whilst someone rushes across the stage to say you've killed yourself. A glorious performance, indeed!"

"But I had created the atmosphere of which that tragedy was the inevitable conclusion."

"Suicide is never inevitable, and it's never a conclusion."

"Oh, Hughie, you're *hard*."

"Because the blind human tries to write a full stop where the Great Unknown has traced a question mark, you blame the latter."

"The latter created the former."

Mr. Inskip paced the room in silence. When he did reply his back was towards Margaret Stair.

"The latter created the former, and with the creation gave the created Free-Will. Why then turn on the Creator because the mere human uses His gift with hopeless unimaginativeness?"

"I don't understand you."

"Is there *anything* so hopelessly unimaginative as suicide?"

"Hughie, you're talking like Hamlet."

"And you like Ophelia."

Mrs. Stair flushed suddenly, and, looking upwards, met a pair of dark and piercing eyes fixed upon her rather sternly. There was an expression in them she had not seen there since one terrible day five years ago when Inskip, calling to enquire the doctor's verdict, had found her alone in her room with a bottle of strychnine beside her.

She hid her face in her hands. "Hughie, you're thinking of that dreadful day. I wish you'd forget it."

He walked over to her sofa, and sat down beside her. She could still feel his eyes searching her face. But he did not speak.

"Won't you ever forget it?"

"I don't think I ever shall."

"I suppose you think me wicked?"

"Foolish—which is infinitely worse."

"I had just been told I was in for two years of agony, and a lifetime of invalidism."

"And you'd exchange that for an eternity of nothingness?"

Margaret Stair leaned forward impetuously on her sofa. "Hughie, is that why you won't even let me act a suicide?"

"Yes," said Mr. Inskip. "It is."

The beautiful eyes watching him darkened and softened. "I believe you're really very fond of me," said Margaret. "No woman ever had such a kind big brother. Why *are* you so good to me, Hughie?"

Inskip was glancing at his watch, and did not reply for a minute. Then he picked up his manuscript. "I must be off. My wife and I dine out to-night, and I'm late. . . . Why am I 'so good' to you? Because you're the best woman I know, Margaret, and the worst-used."

He closed the door as he spoke.

CHAPTER II

WHILE Mr. Inskip, in no undecided terms, was expressing his opinion of the folly of suicide to Mrs. Stair, his wife, in their flat in Buckingham Gate, was submitting her fair head to the coiffing of her French maid.

All the women in London at that moment were adopting what they called the "turban" fashion. That is to say, whatever the cast of the countenance, whatever the quality of hair, whatever the expression of feature, each alike had her tresses brushed to an oily silkiness and wrapped neatly round her head, somewhat after the manner of a bathing-cap.

Iris, the gentle austerity of her face softened by the light of the myriad wax-candles grouped round the mirror on her dressing-table, gravely regarded her reflection. The wide grey eyes were raised to the neat sweep of unwaved hair indifferently enough; then they fell slowly, half-hesitatingly, to meet their own reflected self. From the mirror a soul seemed to gaze into another soul with an eternal question.

"How does Madame like herself?" asked the maid anxiously.

"It is hideous," said Mrs. Inskip, "but it is *chic*. It will suffice."

The maid slipped the blue silk wrapper off the white shoulders, and brought forward a grey chiffon dress with wide floating sleeves.

"This is the robe in which Monsieur says that Madame looks like a sea mist," said she, and she glanced towards the ceiling, as if to call a witness to the eccentricity of the English.

But Mrs. Inskip immediately responded with warmth to the depressing simile.

"Yes, I remember. I'm glad you brought out that dress, Seraphine. Now put a narrow band of black velvet round my hair, with a diamond star at the left side, and fetch me the long platinum chain with the diamond plaque."

"Madame 'ave such good taste," murmured the maid.

"What time is it?"

"It is 'alf-past seven, Madame."

"I will wait for your master in the library. Bring me my cloak and '*Le mariage de Chiffon*.'"

The library was dimly lighted by two tall candles in massive silver sticks on Inskip's writing-table, and by a gas-fire, shaped to simulate the burning of moss-grown logs. The fire was turned low. Iris drew her chair up in front of it, and fell into a reverie.

Her six months' marriage had altered the outer woman greatly. Her face had lost for ever its look of childish irresolution; the mouth no longer wavered; and the eyes no longer held their limitless boredom. But even now it was not the face of a happy woman—for about the face of a happy woman there is always the suggestion of peace.

Iris had spent her honeymoon in the Isle of Skye. When Inskip had suggested that spot to her rather diffidently her heart had leaped wildly at the prospect the situation conveyed. Alone on a rugged island with the man she loved! Could heaven promise more?

The weather, too, was all she could desire as an adjunct to the scene. The sun never shone throughout the fortnight; the sea presented a sullen face of foreboding disaster, and the sky was of that perpetual grey that she thought so subtle, and so perfect. There was a caressing, unceasing wind from the west; it touched their cheeks night and day with warmth and wetness. Iris felt as if she were moving through an incarnate Nocturne by the late Mr. Whistler, and could imagine nothing more desirable, unless it were one by Chopin. One night a thick fog descended over the sea, and they lay awake listening to the sirens. Hugh was first and foremost the tempestuous lover, and she felt that the high-water mark of possible happiness had been reached. And perhaps it had.

The fog thickened next morning, drifting hazily over the tops of the tall poplar trees, and blurring the sharp outline of the crofters' red-tiled cottages. Iris, at breakfast, remarked dreamily, "How infinitely more beautiful suggestion is than reality. I never knew poplars could be so lovely before," (and shivered in her dress which had a Peter Pan collar). She had a curious conviction that her husband's subtle mind—(she felt certain his mind *was* subtle)—would appreciate the subtlety of her own.

But he wrapped a navy-blue silk muffler round his collar instead of closing the window as he had in-

tended to do, and she noticed throughout breakfast that he looked anything but comfortable, and that he expressed no admiration of the thin waves of feathery white that floated ethereally through the room.

Later in the day he entered the kitchen suddenly when she was saying to the landlady, "How I *loathe* your Scotch mists." Fortunately he could not have heard her (for his face expressed no surprise whatsoever), but the situation gave her a momentary panic.

She still longed with all her soul to preserve untainted the mental vision her husband had conceived of her. He had never in so many words described to her what it was, but she had little difficulty in constructing his ideal from the data within her possession. He had fallen in love with her on a wild and sullen moor, whither she had flown from convention at night. They had never been the ordinary lovers of the ordinary grooves. For them had been no chaperon, no house-party, no ball-room or conservatory, no hunting in couples. He had been interested in her because she was strange and unusual. It became, therefore, a fetish with young Mrs. Inskip after her marriage to be as unlike other people as possible.

But in some ways she found her husband exceedingly normal—and, unfortunately, it was in the very ways in which she, herself, had cultivated the abnormal—the little everyday ways of life. Hugh thought fogs depressing, gloomy things; he liked bacon and eggs for breakfast, much to the surprise of his wife who, surmising on his distinctly Russian type of feature, had expressed her own preference for the

continental roll and coffee; and he never would talk about his soul—or hers (which was even more trying).

Again, he expressed his opinion that the *Rhapsodies Hongroises* were infinitely more suited to the feminine temperament than Brahms—even than Brahms on the organ, played by Iris with the bourdon stop and many reed combinations of quavering melody. He never seemed to have heard of Omar Khayyâm—who had been a sort of stained-glass window saint at the rectory—and it was only by accident that she learned that he knew him by heart in the original, and was wearied to death of the English translations as raved over by the English Miss.

As a lover he was all those wonderful things that Iris had never dreamed of. He was very fierce and very tender at one and the same time, but, through it all, he seemed bound round and about with a sort of iron self-restraint. Iris sometimes speculated on what he would be like if he “let himself go.” At other times, when a strange mood was upon her, she wished she could see him really angry. She wondered what he would do if she gave him cause for jealousy—for to her mind, at that time of her life, jealousy was the primary motive of all anger on the part of a husband.

But, though he was so normal and so very English about his breakfast and music and the irresistible Omar, he was strange in many other ways. His craving for solitude was erratic, but persistent. On an average three times a week, without excuse or explanation, he would disappear; ostensibly to go for some rough walk whither his wife could not accom-

pany him. He invariably returned alert, bright-eyed, invigorated. Iris wondered if he had a liver, and if the walks were medically advised. As time went on she persuaded herself that this was so, and that Hugh shrank from mentioning so unpoetic an ailment to her. Somehow the idea seemed to draw him nearer to her—it was so exactly the course she would have pursued herself!

When they took up their abode in London there were the same little difficulties, combated (but not conquered) by Mrs. Inskip in the same way. Save for occasional excursions to town for shopping, the metropolis was almost unknown to her before her marriage plunged her straightway into the artistic, journalistic, Bohemian set of which her husband was a somewhat meteoric member. For the first time in her life she saw a Gaiety opera and an Empire ballet, each of which secretly delighted her alike for its beautiful scenery and its innocent impropriety, until, with a sudden panic, she remembered that probably Hugh would consider both the entertainments unintellectual in the extreme.

He seemed, she noticed, a little surprised at the gentle reserve of her praise, and the next Saturday he took her to a matinée at the Court Theatre to see a problem play in which there were three suicides, two Improper Persons, and a Canon with Doubts. The dresses were unremarkable, and the dialogue was extraordinarily intense—so much so that even the page-boy who brought in tea (in a badly-fitting livery) uttered an epigram.

Iris, as they drove home, waxed enthusiastic, though

she had been more than a little bored. Her husband stroked his beard, and looked profoundly unfathomable. But that evening, after dinner, she felt him looking at her rather searchingly. For a moment her heart beat wildly. Then she escaped into her safest of all shelters—silence, and Hugh curled up on the couch, took out his fountain-pen and a writing block, and finished an article on "Environment" for the "Saturday Review."

His Essays baffled her—frankly. She was abnormally interested in all he wrote, and searched the indexes of all the weekly journals for the signature "H. D. I." This method pleased her infinitely more than would have the simpler plan of enquiring of her husband in which papers his articles would appear. But the pleasure invariably evaporated with seeing his signature on the bookstall poster, buying the journal, and secreting it for private perusal when Hugh was out. For in each and all of the things he wrote there was an undercurrent she could not fathom. If she read an article in the "Observer" on "Modern Unbelief," and was vaguely disturbed by a sort of critical tolerance, it was only to discover the H. D. I. signature to a short poem on "God in Nature" in the "Spectator," of which she could understand nothing (for it was in Greek), but which drew forth a lengthy correspondence on the Beauty of Holiness, and the Holiness of Beauty.

He had, in the course of his thirty-seven years, written four plays and translated two. These she devoured eagerly, with a vague wonder as to how her husband, with his almost abnormally restrained view of the relation of the sexes, would handle the difficult

Problem of Life. Here again she was baffled. The plays seemed like lifeless skeletons to which she could neither supply blood nor bone. Two of them were about quite dreary people who lived in a suburb (and the Rectory Culture always talked of the Suburbs as something infinitely less intellectual than Hell). The problem presented was more of the clashing of wills than of passions; the End was indefinite, and Iris thought that the end of a play should write *Finis* for all the players. She could make nothing of them—but at least they were *cold*.

Then she found a little tempestuous three-act tragedy that was anything but cold; and was miserable. Hugh wrote of feelings and emotions which had never touched her own well-regulated married life. She was excessively unhappy for a week, and watched him furtively with quiet eyes that wondered greatly. Fortunately, a second perusal of the play, and the discovery of a note at the back, informed her that it was translated from the French, and that the Censor had objected to a cot-scene.

She believed absolutely in his genius, but was privately chagrined that his genius took a form she could not understand. After a few months this chagrin became almost unbearable, and it was then she devised the plan (not unknown to the wives of other geniuses) of skipping the labyrinth and arriving at her husband's mental destination even before he himself had reached there. In this gymnastic exercise she attained, after six months of marriage, a marked proficiency.

But sometimes a flicker of expression on his immobile

face, or a sudden challenge in his dark and piercing eye, would send her into a panic of fear lest he should "find her out." She loved him so passionately that she thought she would die if that were to happen. Once she asked him, tentatively, if he liked clever women.

"Cleverness is a disease, and should be stamped out," he said.

"But Hugh, I thought you liked clever people."

"God forbid!" And he spoke with genuine emotion.

She longed to ask him what he meant, but did not like to do so. However, in one of his essays, she came across the remark that cleverness was "the bastard child of Wisdom." And though she thought the same idea might have been conveyed more delicately (and Inskip was a past master in such tricks of speech), she understood what he meant. From that moment she tried most profoundly to be wise. Poor Iris!

Meanwhile the little imprisoned soul in her graceful, fragile body fluttered more and more feebly. When she looked into her mirrored eyes, as she had done to-night, they had looked back at her with the eyes of a stranger. "I used to know Iris Elaine Davenant," they seemed to say, "but who are you?"

Those eyes had asked that question in no uncertain voice that night, and something of the same expression was in them still when Inskip, rather flushed and breathless, opened the door at ten minutes to eight.

"Iris, a thousand apologies. I can change in the car, if you think there's any necessity."

She rose from her chair, graceful and smiling. "If

you can dress in ten minutes, it will do. Ten minutes will get us to Gloucester Gate. You must lie prettily to your hostess about being held up at the Circus."

For a moment he stood rigid, looking at her. She thought he was going to speak, for his mouth opened. Then he closed it sharply, turned on his heel, and left the room. She wondered what he had been going to say. She could not possibly imagine. . . . Then she caught a glimpse of her slight and graceful figure in the glass of a picture, and blushed. She was wearing his favourite dress; her hair shone like pale gold; diamond plaques swung on platinum chains were the most exquisitely suggestive of all jewels—Hugh himself had once said they reminded him of the glory of life, hanging by a thread. . . . She understood his expression now.

Then she remembered how he had looked when he burst into the room—flushed and elated. She wondered where he had been. It was too warm and rainy for one of his long walks, and yet he had that extraordinary air of mental exhilaration he seemed to derive from any strenuous physical effort. Where could he have been in London to bring that vivid look into his very inexpressive face? Unfortunately there seemed no means of knowing (save by asking!).

He was back with her in an incredibly short time, looking very handsome and unusual, as he always did at night when artificial light brought out the excessive darkness of his hair and eyes. He wrapped her carefully in her shell-pink satin cloak, and handed her into the waiting motor-car. He said nothing about her dress, and nothing about her coiffeur, and he did

not hold her hand—which was a joy he sometimes vouchsafed to her on these occasions. The light from the little electric bulb above his head fell full on his profile. He looked now neither vivid nor alert—merely the ordinary, immobile Englishman, about to fulfil a dinner engagement.

She was moved by a sudden impulse.

"What made you so late this evening, Hugh?" she asked.

"Oh! I'd been to see Mrs. Stair," he answered.

CHAPTER III

LOOKING backwards, Mrs. Inskip invariably dated her unhappiness from that warm April evening when she and her husband exceeded the speed limit, and did the journey from their flat to Gloucester Gate in exactly eight minutes.

The streets were bright and crowded, the town smelt of freshly-washed asphalt, the gas lamps threw graceful shadows upon the wet pavements, jewelled advertisements flashed in and out of the darkness; London looked its most beautiful, its most seductive, and its most heartless. As the electric car sped its noiseless way Iris leaned back, and closed her eyes.

This was the life for which she had craved. It was night, and she was in London. How often in her girlhood's days had she not longed for the combination—even before she had begun to long for the ideal lover.

And now she had all three. Soon the dinner, to which neither of them was particularly anxious to go, would be over; they would speed through the streets again to the accompaniment of the motor's musical horn . . . then Hugh and she would be alone, and together.

She loved the night, and particularly the darkness of night, for it was then she could unveil her inmost

soul to her husband, knowing that his impassive but keenly observant eyes could not be deciphering her face—a process that always caused her some discomfort.

This “unveiling” was a little difficult in the daylight, and it required more nerve than she possessed, even though she was inspired by the keenest of all possible motives—love; and the keenest of all possible desires—the desire to interest the loved one.

She told her husband of the loneliness of her childhood; of the dreams, and of the visions. He listened with grave politeness, but he did not appear so impressed as he might have been. He had an embarrassing way of keeping his eyes on the ground, and then suddenly raising them and giving her a long questioning look—almost as the look of a child when it first learns the existence of fiction as apart from truth. Now and again Iris had blushed scarlet, and stumbled. Finally she kept her revelations entirely for the midnight hour.

“No one understood me at home,” she told Hugh one night when he had been very charming to her, and she was wildly happy.

“All women are difficult of comprehension by the laws of sanity,” was his startlingly matter-of-fact reply.

She did not like being classed so comprehensively with the great majority, and stirred restlessly on her pillows.

“Not *all* women, surely?” she said.

“The first woman surprised even her Maker,” he rejoined. “Isn’t that a final answer to the idiosyncrasies of sex? If it is not, one would like to

conjecture His opinion on her twentieth-century successor."

But, though he discouraged her reminiscences of the Sorrows of her Youth, he was (or appeared to be) very interested in her imagination when it had as a foundation the imaginary only. Iris had been married several months before this mental aspect of her husband dawned on her; and when it dawned on her she could not understand it; and when she understood it she could not live up to it. A lengthy course of the riot of imagination had entirely annulled the at-no-time definite line of demarcation between it and the Actual in her mind. But the fact that secretly dismayed her was that, though she herself hardly knew when she was telling the entire truth, her husband invariably seemed to know when she was not. Her consciousness of this was purely intuitive, for he never made any direct allusion to the matter. But she felt he was studying her, drawing deductions, building up an analysis—bit by bit.

Her embarrassment at this was not unmixed with pleasure, for she thought that he was "interested"—and was that not what she so craved he should be? With her new-born gift she understood where he was, without understanding how he got there. Knowing that he was unfailingly attentive, if silent, when she wove the somewhat humdrum facts of her life into a skilful embroidery, she cultivated the habit—at night, when he could not watch her with his disconcertingly cool and attentive scrutiny. He said nothing for some weeks, and Iris, invariably her own heroine, thought

him interested and impressed. But one evening he turned round on her—almost irritably.

"What you want," he said, "is a sense of proportion."

"I don't understand you," she faltered.

"You know, Iris, if you were a school-boy, they'd say you told awful crams."

"*Hugh!*"

He was quite impenitent. "You're a dear little girl, but what you want is a good dose of realism. Your imagination has grown flabby, and needs bracing up."

And she had believed him interested—even impressed! Iris hid her hot cheeks in the bedclothes and cried herself to sleep.

Whether he noticed dark rings round her eyes in the morning or not she did not know, but he came from his dressing-room and sat on the edge of her bed as she was drinking her cup of tea, took both of her long fair pig-tails in his hands, and looked at them with eyes which held a good deal of tenderness. Iris was so upset by this performance that her hand trembled, and some of the tea was spilt on the blue satin quilt.

Throughout the day, and for several days afterwards, the half-humorous tenderness in her husband's manner towards her increased rather than otherwise. He borrowed her two big volumes of Swinburne's "Poems and Ballads" (and forgot to return them), also all her Mendelssohn's "Lieders" in the beautiful red and gold binding with which she had beguiled many plaintive hours in the rectory days. He gave her instead some preludes of Bach, which might mean a

great deal, she felt sure, if there had been some pedal marks; and he gave her a complete set of Jane Austen's works.

"Adorable Jane," he called her.

Iris, being a little uncertain of the chronology of the authoress, felt a pang of retrospective jealousy, and wondered if there had ever been passages between himself and the adorable one. But, after trying vainly to read "Emma," she returned it to him.

"Hugh," she cried desperately, "I can't endure it! I haven't got the temperament."

To her surprise he put his hands on her shoulders, and looked at her with genuine affection, and said a most amazing thing:

"I like you for telling me!"

He took her for a walk in Regent's Park that morning. It was very clear and frosty, but in the distance there was an indefinite haze, and Iris was convinced she saw violet shadows and other lovely atmospherical effects which she pointed out to her husband in suitable terms. To her secret chagrin he only remarked, "This is the sort of day to give one a very remarkable appetite." And, as she still clung to the violet shadows, and the strange orange sky where the red sun hid shyly behind a white pinafore, he pointed out a crossing-sweeper who, bereft of his employment by the hard frost, had, with infinite pains, swept apart two neat little fringes of dust, and was gravely, broom in hand, standing beside them, touching his cap.

"Quaint, ain't it?" he said.

After luncheon, at which he appeared very hungry, she went into the drawing-room and played two

fugues by Bach in the hopes he would hear her. They were very sombre, though doubtless very profound, but there was always a little bit in the prelude somewhere that gave her the impression that the mighty Jean Sebastian had been human after all. To this little bit she clung with fingers tender with expression. Hugh came in towards the end of the *finale*, cigarette in hand.

"Well, how do you like the old fellow?" he asked, with a gleam of amusement in his eye.

"Oh, he's magnificent!" his wife said, enthusiastically.

Somehow he did not seem as pleased with her as when she had decried against Miss Austen's works. He stood with his back to the fire, smoking his cigarette, and looking at her rather critically. Iris, who knew that her left profile (the one he could see) was very pretty, and that her hair was ruffled by the wind, wished that she might venture to play the most seductive of Mendelssohn's melodies. Hugh, she often thought, needed that kind of thing more than other men. He was never entirely spontaneous—or he never had been since their return from Skye.

As she thought this he crossed the room, stood behind her with his legs far apart and his hands in his pockets, looking down at her fair head with eyes that certainly were not at all uninterested. She could see him quite distinctly in the big silver glass that stood on the piano-top.

"Bach is excellent amusement for women," he said.

"Oh Hugh, what *do* you mean?" (She wondered

if he really knew how anything but amusing one woman found him.)

"Anything you don't understand is amusing—for a time."

She swung round on her stool to look at him. She thought the expression in his eyes simply delightful. She wished he would drop the musical similes and come to things that really mattered.

"But no man every *really* understands a woman——" she began.

He took his hands hastily out of his pockets, smiled at her, and walked towards the door. She knew he had a business appointment, but she knew also that his appointment would well have permitted him an extra ten minutes with his wife.

Handle between fingers, he turned his head towards her. She felt a strange excitement. He *was* going to say something about women, after all.

What he did say was:

"You see, Mendelssohn and Bach both had the same bricks, but one built cathedrals, and the other picture-palaces."

When she heard the front door finally close on this most disappointing of men Iris put up the top of the piano, and burst into Liszt's most riotous *Hongroise Rhapsodie*, which she played with so much enthusiasm, and so many wrong notes, that the gentleman in the flat above put her down mentally as a professional.

Still to Iris the fact that her husband was also her critic—however gentle a one—had its attractive side. She liked to think she puzzled him sometimes. It pleased her to think that to him she was somewhat of

a problem—and a problem to which he could find no answer (because there was no answer). She knew she was very subtle, and she was thankful she was. She felt certain Hugh would have wearied in a week of the doll type of woman.

Even to herself she would not admit that many of her subtleties were home-grown, and nurtured with all the tender pride of the amateur: that, indeed, she was a great deal more normal than she allowed herself to appear. Since her marriage she had dropped a great deal of her "pose"—and thought she had dropped it all (which was natural enough in a girl who hardly knew herself which was the real Iris, and which was not). And always with her there was the great motive of her love for her husband, which was the best and most real thing in her life.

Then, quite suddenly, he ceased from cultivating her literary and musical taste. He let her read Swinburne and Pierre Loti, and play Mendelssohn and Mascagni, and fill her rooms with angels and seraphs by Burne-Jones and Rossetti. She thought he was growing bored, and was overwhelmed with mortification.

And then on that rainy April night he had come home with the old keen look on his face; with his eyes very bright, and his mouth very merry.

And he admitted he had been with Mrs. Stair.

It is rather a terrible reflection on the greatest of the passions to say that, though it can produce the most finished visionary, it can also create an alertness bordering on the sly. Love can make of a dwarf

giant; and yet who, remembering David, will deny that it can make of a giant a very small man?

Iris loved her husband more and more as the days passed on, but, dating from that April evening, her love, shaking off all its shackles of a beautiful dream, began to study him with a persistent intelligence.

He was always very gentle with her, and very tender. Anyone less like the imperious, almost brusque man she had met night after night on the moors could not be imagined. He seemed to have lost a good deal of his fire, she thought, or was it (oh! desperate fear) that no longer was she the match to set it alight? He did not worry her any more with his peculiar ideas, but she wished with all her heart he would, for now she felt, with a flash of intuition, that it was simply because he understood so much that he asked so little.

And then within her, in pain and anguish, was born the desperate fear of losing him; the desperate desire to hold him—at all costs. Old stories she had heard in the village recurred to her; stories from which she had always shrunk in a proud disdain. Certainly the gossips had chattered; Mr. Inskip's friendship with Mrs. Stair was *odd* (and, in a village, if you are odd you might as well be excommunicated at once).

There must have been something extraordinarily fascinating, so poor Mrs. Inskip thought, to have kept her husband's interest unimpaired for over seven years. Of course, Margaret Stair was beautiful—everyone owned that, but Hugh was as "queer" about beauty as he was about other things. He often said, "Of all the chains by which woman holds man

mere beauty is the least secure." When she had asked him which was the strongest he had replied, "Oh, personality, I should say, but a common aim runs it close."

She began casually to question the men and women she met in London about Mrs. Stair. It was a little difficult to get satisfactory answers. There had been so many new stars in the firmament since poor Margaret's terrible accident. People would look vague. "Mrs. Stair? She's dead, isn't she, or a hopeless invalid?" "Oh, Mrs. Stair, wasn't she mixed up in a scandal with a Grand Duke or something?" "Mrs. Stair? One used to hear that she was so terribly intense, and invariably fell in love with the man she acted with, *pro tem.*—and the wives rebelled."

This was all very vague, and Iris knew a good deal of it was untrue as well. But one answer rankled: "Mrs. Stair? You should ask your husband. They're great chums."

Iris searched the illustrated magazines of seven years ago when Margaret Stair had been in her zenith. Their pages were full of her lovely face and her lovely poses. She was the most graceful *tragedienne* that ever trod the boards. There were any amount of picturesque stories about her. She was the daughter of an orange-grower in Seville. She had run away from a convent with a Crown Prince. She was mad over anything Italian, and had been seen in a street in Soho dancing with two little swarthy-faced children of an organ-grinder. Evidently the press-agency of that day understood its work.

Mrs. Inskip grew weary of searching for information

in such a picturesque heap of lies. "Hugh," she asked her husband suddenly one day, "who *was* Mrs. Stair?"

"Why use that tense?" he replied, somewhat testily.

"Well, who *is* she then?"

"A most cruelly-used woman."

"How do you mean?"

He looked at her for a moment before replying. He seemed to shrink from putting his meaning into words. When he did speak it was very slowly, as if weighing every syllable.

"She used to be the most intensely alive person one ever met. She is condemned to a perpetual inactivity. She possesses the rare fire of genius. She has to stand aside while feeble torches light the way."

"I like her immensely," said Iris.

He said nothing; he did not look at her. Yet his wife had the sudden conviction that he had seen her with a more piercing vision than the eyes of the body; that he had answered with something more forcible than mere words.

"I would like to be great friends with her," she said; and for the moment she thought she meant it. Though what she really would have liked was that personal intimacy which veils a feminine curiosity very prettily, and with many women passes for friendship. (For, indeed, curiosity can be so exquisitely draped that it can even pass for love, and has been the instigating motive of many a marriage.)

Mr. Inskip's face betrayed no particular interest in the subject, but there was something in the square of his shoulders that impelled his wife to pursue her questions.

"Don't you think she and I could be friends?"

He stroked his beard . . . and smiled.

"Hugh, do answer."

"Then, frankly—I don't," he replied.

Iris felt her face crimsoning. "Why?" she asked.

"You're in different worlds."

"Yes, but we're both in the World."

He sat down beside her, and took her hand in his for a second—a caress that, like all other caresses, was very rare with him. "The inference you draw from that cosmopolitan statement is ideal," he said, "but I don't think it works altogether."

"Why shouldn't it?"

"It teaches one a divine tolerance—and that's all."

She wondered for a moment if that were what he himself were learning—if it were the explanation of his unfailing gentleness to her. But she clung to her question.

"Why don't you think Mrs. Stair and I could be friends?"

"Because, if you *will* have it, she has been through the world of suffering, and you . . . have only played with life."

She looked at him, indignation in her eyes, and at her heart the most poignant pain she had ever felt. Was this what he thought of her? Was this the deduction he had drawn from the disjointed histories she had given him of her lonely childhood, her misunderstood temperament, her revolt against the iron bars which had surrounded her imaginative girlhood? *Played with life!*

"Hugh!" she cried, and her voice trembled. "You don't understand."

"I think I do."

"Then you are unjust."

He did not reply to that. But after a minute he put his hands on her shoulders, and looked down—down—into the eyes raised to his, as if he were searching for something he knew once had been there; might be there again; but was not there now. And Iris, looking up at him, even with the pain at her heart, felt she was nearer him at that moment than she had ever been before . . . than she had ever been to any human soul before.

CHAPTER IV

IN spite of Mrs. Inskip's desire for a closer friendship with Margaret Stair, the Fates decided otherwise.

On the two or three occasions when she went by invitation to the cozy little flat in Shaftesbury Avenue, it was only to find the room filled with a lively throng of men and women; most of them lesser lights in the Artistic-Bohemian world; all of them very much determined on "cheering-up" their pathetically beautiful hostess.

Iris, conscious of a touch of rather chilly dignity which she could rarely throw off, felt an outsider. She did not understand the stage-jargon that took the place of conversation; she did not like the men—who were all a little too handsome; or the women—who were all a shade too conspicuous-looking. And she always felt a fierce stab of jealousy when her eyes fell on Margaret's exquisite, vivid face.

Though he was always invited, Hugh never accompanied her on these occasions. He told his wife that tea-fights were not in his line.

Iris's own bitter mental observation on the remark was that what he preferred was a *tête-à-tête* with Mrs. Stair.

Only once did she refer to the subject—and then very casually.

"Who was Mrs. Stair's husband?" she asked one evening when they were drinking their after-dinner coffee.

His face lit up suddenly. "Elöise's husband? A Russian Government offic—" Then he stopped abruptly, looked a shade confused, burst out laughing. "I was thinking of something else," he said. "Mrs. Stair's husband? I haven't the faintest idea."

"Perhaps," Iris said, "she never was married."

He looked at her with a bland smile. "Are those rectory morals?" he asked.

His wife suddenly felt like a spiteful child.

"I meant perhaps Mrs. Stair adopted her name as a stage-title."

His eyes met hers gravely. "I beg your pardon—I misunderstood you," he said.

And Iris, sick at heart, knew he understood only too well.

"Don't you know anything about her past at all?" she asked persistently. Suddenly she felt an irresistible longing to badger him out of his provoking coolness; to make him angry; above all, to make him say something that was not true.

"I know she was the most brilliant actress of the Edwardian period."

"And is that all?"

"Isn't it enough?"

"But her private life? Surely, as her friend, you know something about that?"

He looked at her, and her eyes fell.

"If I did, do you think I should *talk*?" he asked.

"You might tell your wife."

"That little matrimonial blunder does not appeal to the man you married," he told her.

"You mean you *do* know, and won't say?"

"Your inference is purely—imaginary."

Somehow his word stung her into recklessness.

"I wonder you let me visit her," she cried.

A moment afterwards she could have bitten her tongue out. Hugh put down his coffee-cup, and rose. She thought he was going to leave her—in silence, that most terrible of replies.

But, half-way to the door, he paused—retraced his steps. Iris's fair face was flushed, her eyes very bright; she seemed on the verge of tears. He looked at her searchingly. Then his eyes grew tender.

"Lie down, child," he said, "you're overwrought."

"You should not aggravate me so, Hugh."

He looked penitent—but weary.

"Believe me—I never meant it." Then he paused. His next words came slowly. "You are not yourself just now. It is not my gentle little Iris who has these bitter thoughts of another woman."

Suddenly she broke into passionate tears.

"Oh, Hugh, I am a wretched little beast," she sobbed.

He kissed her, very gently, made her lie down on the sofa, lowered the lights, and then left her alone.

The next morning Iris felt terribly ashamed of herself, and made a mental resolve never again to mention Margaret Stair's name to her husband. Never again to think of the two in connection was, unfortunately, beyond her powers of control just then.

It was June, and the year of a great national festival. London was very full, and intensely light-hearted. Iris, who perforce had to take things quietly for a time, sometimes felt a wild longing to be back again on the moors at her home, with Hugh beside her, in that time of perilous delight when neither of them had learned the other's weakness.

Even as she classed herself and her husband together in the great bond of human frailty, she would pause to consider. What, after all, did she really know about him? Marriage, for him, had torn away all that veil of mystery in which she had so long been clothed. For her? She no more understood the real Hugh than she had in her girlhood.

He was very busy, indeed, through those long summer days, and she saw little of him till the evening, when they dined together, and then usually motored into Surrey for some fresh air. He was writing a series of articles for the "Fortnightly," on Egyptian papyrus; he was translating a Greek play for a big girls' college; finishing his own novel on the Franco-Prussian War; and gathering data for a sequel to it.

So much he told her.

Inskip preferred to do most of his writing in a tiny office he rented in Buckingham Street, whither he did not encourage his wife's presence. Indeed, Iris had taken a dislike to the little room the only time she was in it, for a moment's observation had shown her that there was no photograph of herself, either on the mantelpiece, or on the roll-top desk which stood in a corner under an uncurtained window and had a railed

ledge on which she might have posed in an effective frame.

The room looked dingy in the extreme. She asked him if it were ever dusted.

He laughed.

"Regularly," he said. "At night a charlady comes in and sweeps all the dust off the chairs and desks on to the floor, and in the morning a gentleman brushes it all back again from the carpet to the desk and chairs. What greater attention could dust expect?"

He looked round the little room with positive affection. Iris felt she hated it.

She still took an abnormal interest in all he wrote, and read his articles in the "Fortnightly" greedily, although her private impression of papyrus was that it was very much over-rated stuff. His novel she frankly thought uninteresting. There were whole chapters without any conversation at all, and when there was any it was interlarded with strange and terrible oaths. She skipped page after page to find the heroine and know the sort of woman her husband admired—and was baffled by discovering it was a lady of fifty who kept a wine shop in Marseilles, and had a talent for intrigue.

"Hugh," she asked him, "do you like writing novels?"

"Writing that Franco-Prussian stuff was a pure joy to me," he answered.

Iris sighed to herself.

Sometimes she thought he had work of which he did not tell her. Mysterious messengers came to the flat, and delivered large envelopes with magnificent

seals. When he came in, and saw them lying on the little silver tray in the hall he always frowned and looked irritable, and immediately took them off to his study, locking the door.

As one may well believe this procedure aroused in his wife a very ardent curiosity—which he never satisfied.

Also he was very busy with a manuscript to which he gave more time than to all his other work put together. He took it for "walks" with him, and he took it with him to his locked study, and he took it with him daily to his office in Buckingham Street.

Iris tried with all her strength not to worry over this most enigmatical product of her husband's brain, but the task was beyond her. She found herself at all hours of the day puzzling over it. Why was Hugh so secretive about this particular thing? Over his other work he was careless enough. He left all the rough manuscripts of his essays about in every hole and corner of the place: the maids had been ordered never to touch a piece of paper in their master's handwriting.

Her opportunity came one morning. Hugh had been shut in his study for several hours, and when he did come out it was only to call to his wife that he would not be in for lunch.

She came from her boudoir to see him disappearing towards the lift. Under his arm was a little brown leather cover which always contained the mysterious document. She crossed over to the iron gate, a decision rapidly arrived at, her method, as usual, the circuitous.

"Oh Hugh, could you give in a message at Liberty's for me? Shall you be near?"

"I've business in Shaftesbury Avenue. Is it anything very important? Don't rely on me; I've a terrible memory."

"I want their head fitter up at once."

"Well, telephone!" He sounded irritable.

She broke into a merry laugh. "Of course, what a goose I am!"

The gate slammed. She ran to the window, and saw his agile leap on to a 'bus. Then she lay down, and buried her face in her hands.

So her intuition had been right. The mysterious manuscript constituted some link between him and Margaret Stair, and never had she known him so interested in any other of his writings; for no other work did he need a locked door, absolute quiet; no other work gave him that look of intense nervous excitement.

She pressed her knuckles into her temples, trying to think—to make some definite, coherent story out of the vague hints she had gathered. Was Hugh writing a book with Margaret as heroine? Were they collaborating in a book or a play? Was the little brown manuscript a "blind" to cover his constant visits to Shaftesbury Avenue?

But at this last suspicion her better self awoke in revolt. Hugh and she were as dissimilar as the two poles—she knew now that there were elements in each of their temperaments which never could harmonise till one or the other of them changed. But she had not been married for nearly a year without learning that

her husband's conception of honour was almost abnormally sensitive. Sometimes her greatest heart-ache had been caused by the secret conviction that he knew her own was so very different.

No, the little brown wallet was not a "blind."

And then it seemed as if her better self, elated by its momentary victory, pursued its advantage further. Iris remembered, one by one, all those points in her husband's character which a year's close intimacy had made clear to her. His idealism—an impossible idealism, she often thought; his distaste for the purely physical side of love; his aversion from artifice—he even loathed Rossetti because of the artificiality of his paintings; his blatant truthfulness; his devastating sincerity. Everything that was good in her rose and cried out to what was better in him. And it seemed as if some mysterious power emanated from him in response—a power that joined with her good angel to exorcise the demon of jealousy.

When she met him at dinner it was with a lighter heart than she had had for many weeks. He was looking, she thought, delightfully handsome in his dark, foreign way; but his expression was his usual one of a calm passivity towards the things that are. If he had been with Mrs. Stair, the interview could not have been a particularly interesting one.

Just as she was thinking this he spoke, and her delight evaporated.

"I find poor Margaret has been sent by her doctor to Weisbaden."

"Is she worse?" Iris asked quietly.

"She has had rather bad neuritis in her arm lately,"

he answered. Then he added, almost impatiently. "I particularly wanted to see her about something, too."

After dinner he made her lie on the sofa, and sat beside her, smoking cigarettes, and looking alternately at the ceiling and at her with eyes that held some wickedness, and a good deal of amusement. Iris loved him like that, and would willingly have prolonged the evening, but he took her in his arms and carried her to her bedroom punctually at ten o'clock.

"You are to sleep the clock round," he said.

"Then you must come and read to me, for I'm fearfully wideawake."

He had a standard way of doing this which was an unfailing source of amusement to them both. Sitting on the edge of the bed, with his legs underneath him, Turkish fashion, he would read, in a monotonous and sonorous voice, a chapter of Comte's "Positivism," translated into Greek by himself. The result was swift and inevitable. His young wife's fair head began to nod, her drowsy eyes to close. He would gently walk away.

"Oh Hugh, I'm quite wideawake still," a sleepy voice would call after him.

"'Sh, 'sh," he would murmur.

"Then kiss me good-night."

Which he would do, very gently and tenderly. This evening he did it more so than usual; softly pressing back the fair hair, and looking down on his wife's face that held so much of charm, so much of indecision, so much of latent strength.

"Good-night, darling. Be brave for a little longer."
He switched off the light.

Iris fell asleep utterly happy.

Her rest at nights now was very broken, and she had grown accustomed to waking every two hours or so; sometimes she would switch on the light that hung over the bed, and read for a few minutes until drowsiness again overcame her.

But on this night she slept on, undisturbed, till nearly three o'clock, and then, when she awoke, it was to the consciousness of a great happiness. Almost directly she recalled Hugh's tenderness to her before she slept—and it had been something deeper than tenderness, surely. There had been that look in his eye which she so rarely saw there now—the look that recalled to her the supreme reality that—in spite of their wanderings apart—they were still indissolubly one.

She did not want to read herself to sleep. She lay and meditated dreamily on the Future; the time of peril that was coming; and then the greatest joy of womanhood.

There was a shrill whistle outside. It continued for two or three minutes; then, from the distance, she heard the answering hoot of the summoned taxi. That was the worst of living near a cab-rank. Hugh used to say often that it made him feel he could write a modern Inferno.

He slept in his dressing-room now, and she wondered if the shrill noise would awaken him. She listened attentively.

Yes, he was stirring in his sleep. Then she heard

his voice muttering drowsily . . . then one word, distinct and arresting :

"Elöise! Elöise!" It was almost like a cry.

Iris lay motionless, cold from head to foot. He did not speak again, and she knew he was waking up in earnest, for he switched on his light, and she heard him yawning lugubriously.

Then he evidently noticed that her light was on, for the communicating door between their rooms was never closed.

"Iris," he called softly, "are you awake?"

"Yes."

A minute later he came into her room, looking very big and very sleepy.

"Was it that abominable row that woke you?" he asked.

"No, I was awake before."

He sat down on her bed, still looking very sleepy, and rubbing his eyes. For the first time his wife noticed something wonderfully boyish in him; she recalled, with a startled flash, Margaret Stair's description, "a perfect baby." He looked very cross and drowsy, and as if he would like to punish somebody, and to be petted himself.

"I had a most vivid dream," he said. "One always does, if one is waked suddenly."

Then he looked at her with anxious affection.

"Poor old Iris! You *do* have a thin time at nights now, don't you?"

"Oh, one gets used to them."

"Directly everything is safely over," he said, "I

shall take you to Moscow, where I am very well known, and you will have a ripping time."

"Thank you."

Her voice seemed to startle him. It was frigid. He looked at her in surprise for a moment.

"Are you all right?"

"Quite, thanks."

"Like some tea—or anything?"

"No, thank you."

He yawned involuntarily. "Then good-night, dear. I must get some sleep."

CHAPTER V

TO hear with equanimity your beloved husband calling out the name of another woman in his sleep is an art that can only be acquired by a proficient in that greatest School of Art—Human Nature.

Iris, as yet, had not matriculated in that wonderful little College of the Mind. She could not say, as would a student there: "All the man's life, all his humanity points in one direction. By *that* I judge." On the contrary, she had to endure the torture and the tumult of the Amateur of Life who cries: "*A* has acted exactly like that notorious *B*; therefore *A* and *B* must be precisely similar characters."

Hugh's whole life was actuated by a sense of honour that was fastidious in the extreme. He was moody and eccentric at times; he was extraordinarily aloof on occasions; sometimes, though rarely, he was bitterly cynical (of his own defects); usually, he was intensely and serenely egoistic. But always he was absolutely *straight*. Iris had often felt that this characteristic was the stone wall that reared itself between them.

But Love—the great blunderer—refused to re-read these pages of past experience. Instead, it dwelt morbidly on a look of excitement in the eye so often cold; on a mysterious document the secret of which was withheld from a wife; on the name of another woman cried out in awakening sleep.

Perhaps she had never loved her husband so much before—certainly she had never before so hated the abominable Elöise, whom she had immediately conceived to be none other than Margaret the first time Inskip had mentioned the name some weeks ago. If it were not his own particular name for her, why had he looked confused when he mentioned it inadvertently then? Why did he dream of it? Why did he cry it out in his sleep?

They breakfasted together late the following morning. Iris, in her white tea-gown, with its broad gold-thread hem of Greek key-pattern, and her fair hair coiled in demure bands round her classically small head, looked very young and very fragile. Inskip, who was secretly in a constant state of tumult over her health (a tumult which he, however, concealed most admirably), noticing the dark shadows beneath the grey eyes, and the pathetic droop of his wife's already pathetic mouth, registered a mental curse against the indiscreet conduct of the miserable Eve.

He ate two eggs in absolute silence, for the simple reason that he was too angry with Nature to speak. Unfortunately, his wife immediately thought he was meditating upon his improper Margaret. Her little sensitive face was frigid as she regarded him over the silver urn.

"When you woke last night," she said, "you called out 'Elöise.'"

"I'm glad I didn't say '*damn*,'" was all he answered.

"Who is she? Do I know her?" Iris asked.

"You and she have never met. She wouldn't interest you," he answered, and again the shade crossed his face.

Iris *knew* he lied.

"Do have another egg," she said, scornfully.

He was gazing at her very anxiously. "Look here," he said, "I'm going to have this taxi-whistle nuisance stopped. It's ruining your sleep. You're a wreck."

"It had nothing whatever to do with my sleeplessness."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Let me make you a dear little lettuce sandwich," he said.

"No, thank you."

"I will take you to see the 'Follies' to-night."

"I am in no mood for them."

"Then let us go and weep together at the Elephant and Castle."

She made no answer. Hugh saw that she was angry, and rose hastily. He was an amateur in these domestic matters, and was always terrified of sending his poor little wife into hysterics. Just now he was certain he irritated her, and that she wanted to be alone. He left her.

It was probably the worst thing he could have done, for to Iris, feeling intensely wretched after a bad night, her husband's heartless conduct seemed the last straw. To offer her lettuces and Pélissier when he ought to be praying for her forgiveness!

She went into the drawing-room, and wept till luncheon.

That evening, after dinner, he insisted upon

wrapping her up warmly, and driving her to Surbiton in the motor-car. They took no chauffeur, and, as the road was busy with vehicles, there was small opportunity for conversation. Hugh's attention was rigidly on his wheel; Iris's discreetly on him. She liked to watch his hands; even through his thick leather gloves she thought there was something distinctive about them—something that harmonised with the curious downward poke of his head, and sombre, inscrutable eyes, always half-veiled.

He turned the car's head up a green lane off the beaten track. A soft brown ditch lay on either side, sluggish and serene, and chestnut trees spread their shadows as far as the eye could reach. It was a cool and restful little spot. Inskip put on his brakes and stopped.

"I must light up now," he remarked.

Iris watched him stooping over the lamps. He seemed thoroughly unaware of her scrutiny, and was whistling to himself over his work. She noticed that most beautiful of lines in a man's face—the long sweep from his ear to his jaw. It was very noticeable in this man; somehow it gave him a look of serenity and of power. But, though nothing else contradicted the latter, the serenity was often counterbalanced by the irritable lines on the forehead and around the puzzling eyes.

He glanced up, caught her gaze, held it. Suddenly his wife knew that this was going to be one of those rarest of moods with him—a mood when she could do anything she chose. And it had come when he was lighting a motor-lamp!

It was so like her incomprehensible Hugh. There had been so many moments in their life together when she had craved for this—moments when she had strained every nerve for his passion, as she had months ago in her grey evening gown which he had likened to a sea-mist. And then he was the mechanic. Whilst now, when she was muffled up in her big fur coat, and he was lighting motor-lamps, lo! he was the lover.

He climbed back into the car, but he did not sit down. He stood before her, looking from his gigantic height on her little fair head.

"*Iris!*" he said, almost under his breath.

She could not read the expression that was torturing his face. It was not a page from the book she had imagined he opened a minute ago. This page was one of intensest tenderness, but over it, struggling with it, was one of acutest suffering.

"Hugh!" she cried, sharply, "Hugh! what is it?"

He sat down beside her then, put his arm round her, drew her head on his shoulder.

"It's—it's the little pain of fatherhood. It bites a man sometimes; it cuts deeper than any sword."

She had never heard that sound in his voice before. Was this Hugh speaking—the man who shrank from expressing his inmost thoughts—the man who was apparently, so cold?

"Iris, have I been good to you these long months?"

Then, for the girl, the world swung round and righted itself; the mists of doubt curled upward and vanished; she saw straight and clear. She remembered acts of kindness in a man unversed in

the art ; she recalled tenderness from one who thought little of the outward and visible sign ; she understood for the first time that, of sufferings, physical is the infant, mental the full-grown.

She put out her hand, and he caught it in both his and held it. His hands were like fire.

"I'm so unaccustomed to a woman. I never had a sister. This great act of womanhood is all Greek to me. I'm a stumbler in wide shoes. Iris, *teach* me. Sometimes I think you're unhappy. Tell me what I must not do."

Evening was descending very slowly on the little green lane. Through the scented warmth came the occasional twitter of a drowsy bird ; otherwise the silence was absolute. Though she knew it not, for the girl it was the great crisis of her life. The rarest of all the trinities was hers. She had :

" . . . The time, and the place,
And the loved one, all together."

The soul within her struggled to throw off its bandages ; struggled to reach out to that other soul so very near. For one moment she longed to tell Hugh everything : the doubt, the jealousy, the misery.

Then that part of her that was bigger than her soul arose and fought for itself with the fierceness of desperation. What would Hugh think of her, if she threw off her veil ? What would he think of the pettiness of her views ? How could she ever pose again as an idealist ?

"Hugh," she said quickly, "there is nothing more you could have done."

Then the moment passed, and she wished with all her heart she had answered differently.

He stooped and kissed her little ear. It was very like him to do just that—and no more. Suddenly Iris flung her arms round him, and kissed him passionately on the mouth.

"There is nobody like you," she cried; "nobody like you to me."

For some days afterwards Iris lived in a dream of serene and perfect bliss. She felt extraordinarily well; her nerves were certainly stronger; the weather had the first exquisite throb of autumn in its touch. Hugh was wonderfully tender with her. He seemed a changed character in other ways besides, for he neither went for long walks, cried out "Elöise!" in the early hours of the morning, nor spent a mysterious amount of his time with a mysterious manuscript.

Also, and above all, she knew Margaret Stair was in Germany.

She often thought in those days of her husband's description of himself—a "stumbler in wide shoes." Now that she had the key she had no difficulty in opening the door—and the door opened into a very simple little room in a man's life. She could see him, almost as a child, learning a new and puzzling alphabet, adding up neat little rows of figures, writing prim little essays . . . while, before his eyes, was an open window, calling, calling to the beautiful beyond.

Hugh was an impatient pupil, but he was very keen, and, with himself, he was a tremendous disciplinarian. Sometimes Iris, pursuing her metaphor, thought that

nothing would ever induce the child in her husband to turn his seat in his schoolroom so that he could not see the open window. He was the sort that would face it unflinchingly—and remain where it was.

Therefore it was with the shattering of an ideal that she heard him come in one Wednesday morning and say he must go to Germany on business, and would be away four days.

She looked at him—speechless. She could make nothing of the mask that was his face. She thought he looked pleased and excited; and then she thought he looked worried. Who could tell?

"I only knew this morning," he said.

"I hope you will have an agreeable journey," his wife said.

"I shall be back on Monday evening, for certain."

"Monday evening." She echoed his words pleasantly.

"And now I must fly. I have a hundred things to settle first. I shall leave by the 9.30 to-night."

"By the 9.30," she repeated mechanically. Her heart was beating furiously, but her voice sounded like a melodious bell.

It was an invariable habit of her husband—a habit that often chagrined her—to draw no deductions contrary from those indicated by the spoken word. Sometimes when she had answered him very sweetly—a sweetness that only thinly veiled a bitter irony—he had replied to the former; exactly as if he had not understood how much more a woman may mean than she says. His wife at first had credited him with a curious lack of imagination.

But sometimes she wondered. . . .

If he understood more than appeared likely this morning, she could not be certain. He was hunting round the room for a particular pipe, and a much-loved pair of gloves. He turned at the door.

"Aren't you curious to know why and where I'm going?" he asked.

"Not in the very least," said his wife.

He actually believed her! She could see he did.

"Thank God! for the uncuriosity of women," he said. He beamed on her, and looked wonderfully relieved.

"It is private and confidential business," he said, "and I am not at liberty to mention it. But I am too thankful for words you have not worried the life out of me about it."

Mr. Inskip spoke with real fervour, and, quite evidently, was in touching ignorance of the fact that to his wife, in common with a number of her sex, there were means of acquiring information rather more subtle than those employed by the authors of the Catechism.

"Good-bye, my poor little child," he said. "And do not, I implore you, look so doleful."

"Good-bye," said his wife. "I will pack your portmanteau, and order dinner half an hour earlier."

When he had finally left her, and she had seen him jump into his waiting car, and had kissed her hand to him from the window in case he should be looking up (which he was not), Iris went to her bedroom and locked the door.

She was angrier than she had ever been in her life

—a very gentle life hitherto, of picturesque emotions, admirably controlled. In her girlhood's days she had pointed the way, and her emotions invariably had answered to the signal. There had been hours of revolt when she had rebelled against the decorum of the clerical curriculum, but it was a revolt which had always ended with an eight o'clock dinner with her dreamy old father opposite her, and a cultured converse on the more beautiful aspects of life.

She had often been unhappy, and always been bored, but with the boredom and the unhappiness there had been a tinge of gentle cynicism—that great controller of all real passions. It had always stopped her from going too far, from escaping beyond recall from the conventional shackles of a conventional life. Something had always stood within and yet without her, gently smiling, gently murmuring, "don't be a fool."

But it was no gentle, well-bred, cynical Iris who paced her bedroom floor this morning, pressing her hands to her eyes which were hot with tears. All that was primitive and savage within her was aroused. Once she caught sight of her face in the mirror, and paused. . . . Then the mirrored eyes held her. She went up to the glass, and looked again at her own other self.

Something seemed to be calling to her, to be trying to tell her something. For one strange moment she felt as if, within her own little soul, were a bigger, stronger soul, looking with pitying eyes of a mother on the wayward wanderings of a child.

She turned impatiently. She was no wayward child. She was a cruelly hurt woman.

Her husband appeared to her suddenly as a man who had struggled bravely enough against the flowing tide, and then—even while fighting—had been lured to destruction by the voice of the siren. And the siren, of course, was Margaret Stair.

And then she remembered the night in the little lane, and all its perfect memories of a perfect passion and a perfect love. She could feel her husband's touch . . . see his dark and stormy face . . . taste again the sweet silence of intensest emotion. The memory turned her hot.

She could eat no luncheon, and went for a drive in the Park immediately afterwards; only to return more miserable than before. In less than five hours Hugh would be in the boat-train. For her there would be four days of utter wretchedness. For him—*what?*

She went slowly to her room, trailing her garments wearily along the corridor. As she passed Hugh's study a thought flashed into her mind. She hesitated . . . walked another step or two, then turned and entered.

It was a little, dark room, into which she seldom went. There was hardly any furniture, as she understood furniture. Hugh never sat on a chair and wrote, like other men. His biggest efforts were invariably reeled off as he lay curled up on a divan.

This took up the centre of the room. Above it hung an Eastern-looking lamp, beside it a table as low as the divan, strewn with papers and books . . . that was all.

(When they were first married Iris had put flowers daily on the table; then she had stopped doing so, with the hope that her husband would ask her to re-continue. But he did not—and there the matter ended.)

Iris sat down on the divan. It had many cushions, and was very comfortable; though how Hugh contrived to work on it was a complete mystery to his wife, to whose mind a swing-round chair, a roll-top desk, and a large waste-paper basket underneath it, were the immemorial and only ritual of the writer.

On the table were the morning letters. . . .

Iris buried her face in her hands while the little brass clock beside her ticked off five irrecoverable minutes of her life.

Then she sprang up hastily from the divan—something impelling her to immediate action. But, even as she turned away from the table and towards the door, the sheaf of letters, jammed anyhow into the brass rack, caught and held her fascinated gaze.

She stood still, deliberately playing with a thought. Of course, she would never read one of her husband's private letters, but yet, if she *did* read. . . .

And then, so suddenly and so subtly that the change was upon her before she was aware of it, the thought was no longer her playfellow—it was her master. Involuntarily, she drew nearer the table.

There were fourteen letters in the little rack she held with nervous fingers, glancing from one to the other. There was one in Margaret Stair's handwriting, with a German stamp and postmark of two

days ago. She took it slowly in her hand, replacing the other thirteen on the table.

She drew out the thin paper from the envelope, her heart beating wildly. "My dearest Hughie" was what met her eye in Margaret's large, rather masculine handwriting.

A sound outside caught her ear. She stood rivetted to the spot in terror. The door opened. She dropped the letter like hot coals. She turned to see her husband on the threshold.

She knew her cheeks were as white as death, but with all her heart she thanked Fate; for Hugh could not have seen. Thank God for that! He looked exactly as he always did. She must have dropped the letters and moved away just in time.

She forced a smile, and went towards him.

"I've had one of those dreadful fidgetty fits again, dear. I've been in every room in the flat."

"The car is waiting at the door. Would you like to go for a drive?"

But Iris's nerves were in no state to allow her a *little*-*a-little* with her husband.

"I have worked off the restlessness now," she said. "Hugh, what a remarkable little room this is."

"I couldn't work in it, if it were different." He was standing looking out of the window, and his voice sounded tired.

She moved towards the door.

"I'm going to lie down," she said.

"Can I get you anything?"

"I would like—sleep."

He turned round and glanced at her casually.

"I do not think," he began, and hesitated, "I do not think you will sleep," he ended.

Her heart beat uncomfortably quickly.

"Why do you say that?" she asked.

But his answer reassured her. "There's a do on at the Palace. It's just over now, and the pandemonium of motors outside is worse than the Hampstead Heathen on a Bank Holiday. I've been talking to the Japanese Ambassador. . . . You should have heard his remarks!"

Iris reached her room somewhat calmer. Her first action was to close the window facing on Buckingham Gate: the noise, as Hugh had said, was unspeakable.

Then she caught a glimpse of her face in the glass, and stood dumbfounded. What was it that was written in the excited eyes, and on the flushed cheeks? She had never seen herself look like it before. She could not meet her own eyes in the mirror . . . they seemed to hold a depth of *shame*.

Hugh dined with her, and was very kind and gentle. He kissed her and said "good-bye" soon after, looking at her with a long glance that held an unutterable tenderness—an unutterable pity.

Half-way towards the lift he turned and came back. Iris looked up, startled. He was smiling, but there was an expression on his face she had never seen there before.

"I think, perhaps, I had better tell you the purport of my visit to Germany," he said, "though by doing so I break my word of honour. I am one of the extra King's Messengers. I am going on business of His.

CHAPTER VI

MR. INSKIP, on his return from Germany five days later, made no reference to his journey, and his wife, beyond one swift glance at his face as he entered the room, showed no particular interest in it either. His last remark before he left had filled her with a curious fear. Why had he told her what he had?

She believed it to be true; but she would infinitely have preferred that it were a lie—a lie with an explanatory motive.

In the world of idealists, broadly speaking, there are two classes of people: there is the class that endures the sorrows of death at the desecration of its ideal—and the class that suffers the torture of the damned at the knowledge that itself is no longer the ideal of another.

Iris, emphatically and absolutely, belonged to the larger, and more human class. For Hugh to lie to cover an intrigue was awful enough; for Hugh to know that she would read his private letters was much worse.

It was a warm and airless summer. Iris, thrown more and more on her own resources, pined for the time when she would be free again. The necessary restraint of the ordered life; the thousand and one precautions obligatory; the long afternoon rest; the

absence of excitement—they were all irksome to a nature that had spent most of its existence fighting against chains and bars.

Sometimes she speculated on what sort of a father Hugh would make. Except for that wonderful evening a month ago he had made no reference to the child, beyond an ever-increasing concern for her own health. Once she rebelled against his decision that she must go for no more rides in the car at night.

"It is all hateful—*hateful!*" she cried. "You make me feel like a stud mare."

And then she was ashamed. For Hugh had gone deadly white.

"I was thinking . . . of my child," he said.

Iris was silent for a long time; her husband's words had struck a chord in her heart that had never throbbed there before. Her child—and Hugh's . . . what an infinite possibility stretched before them both.

Because her silence told him more than words, or because he saw on her face a shadow which must be chased away, he crossed over to where she stood and put his hand on her shoulder.

"Patience," he said, "patience. It's a deadly dull brick, but one builds cathedrals with it."

"Hugh . . . I want our child to be a genius."

He took his hand from her shoulder, and looked extraordinarily agitated.

"God forbid!" he said. "Let us desire instead that he may be happy."

His wife looked at him curiously for a long minute. If ever her husband were in earnest, he was in earnest then. She knew enough of him to be certain of that.

"But why shouldn't a genius be happy?" she asked, slowly.

He did not answer for some time, and when he did answer he did not look at her.

"Because they're *outside the ark*."

"What do you mean? I never heard the expression before."

"It's one of Mrs. Stair's aphorisms. That woman is in extraordinarily vivid touch with the actuality of life sometimes."

"Oh, Hugh, explain what you mean."

All his agitation now was gone. He sat down beside her, serene and smiling.

"Iris, you've imagination enough for a multitude. Shall I tell you a parable?"

"Do."

"Set around all sorts and conditions of men there is an invisible circle. Within it, from west to east, and from north to south, you may measure many millions of miles: the climate is adapted to millions of tastes, so is the way of Life within that circle, so is the way of Love, so is the way of Work.

"The outward form of the dwellers within that huge radius differs greatly, so that while one is a jet-black African, another may be a fair-skinned Norwegian, or a dusky Cingalee.

"Again, within that circle you will find the criminal and also the saint; the natural man and the *poseur*; the sensuous and the thick-skinned; the celibate and the man of strange and wild desires. You can draw no hard and fast rule as to the aspirations and aims of these people; for within the circle are the decadent

poet and the coal-heaver, the woman of disordered life, and the Eternal Divine Motherhood——" he paused a second, and looked down into the eyes of the girl beside him.

"But all these people have one undying characteristic, a characteristic as invisible as it is inveterate. It is the capacity for satisfaction. It is even more a negative than a positive quality—it is rather an absence of that eternal dissatisfaction for the Things that Are."

"But, Hugh, half the world is dissatisfied with the things that are; and the other half wants the things that are not."

"Superficially, that is true. But that circle is wide enough to provide room for both those classes—which had better be defined as the class dissatisfied with the things it has, and the class that has learned the impossibility of having the things it wants. This latter is the cynic; but he's *inside* the ark in his thousand."

"I don't in the least know what you mean," said Mrs. Inskip.

"Outside the ark is another class, doomed to unhappiness from the outset. The class that craves eternally, *not* the unattainable possession of another, *not* the attainable after a struggle—but the uncreated."

"Isn't the Ark big enough to hold them?" Iris asked, half-amusedly.

"The world is not big enough to hold them, poor restless, burning souls. They are for ever and for ever outside the ark—the ark that was built for all sorts

and conditions of men and yet, perhaps purposely, left them out."

"What do these 'restless, burning souls' *want*?"

He looked at her curiously for a minute.

"Sometimes they don't know themselves," he replied. "They have objections, but no objective. Without the ark are many women—and many men."

"And are geniuses there in great numbers?"

"There are more geniuses, and more women, than any other class."

"And does the normal man or woman feel a contempt for them?"

"The normal man or woman is rarely aware of the existence of any ark at all."

"Tell me about the geniuses," Iris said, suddenly. "What do they want—what do they do?"

"They chase eternally a beautiful dream—so do those inside the ark. But the outsiders—poor devils,"—he shuddered suddenly—"they know all the while it's a dream; and they burn with a fire of their own creation."

"And the women?"

"Motherhood usually cures *them*," he said.

Iris went to lie down shortly afterwards, and Inskip, contrary to his customary routine, remained idly in the drawing-room, smoking innumerable cigarettes. On his face rested a shadow of unutterable weariness—a weariness that affected his whole body, for his shoulders drooped listlessly, and his arms hung limply either side of his chair.

The year of marriage had altered the outward man

—most difficult and slowest of procedures in the Inskip type. What, then, had it not done to the inner? His face had lost a touch of humour that once irradiated it; in its place now was a sort of irritable patience—a confession of the acceptance, for form's sake, of some of the less inspiring attributes of Life. It was no longer the outward habiliment of that rather rare being—the man of great failures; instead was it apparently the face of a man who, having set out to build cathedrals, has acquiesced in the knowledge that he can only be a fairly successful architect of villas; of the man who, deliberately and designedly, turns his gaze for ever away from impossible heights.

He had never realised so clearly as he did this afternoon that there was, indeed, an Ark for the comfort and soothing of the nerves of the universe, and that he must, as the result of his own nature, remain for ever outside it.

It was not a fact that he had discovered for himself—and he wished devoutly that he never had learned it. It was Margaret who had opened his eyes, and it did not seem extraordinary to Inskip that it should have been she who did it. For Mrs. Stair, though she was no pessimist, had now a touch of biting, mordant criticism of her own and other people's defects. Hugh, looking back and remembering a beautiful girl lying on a rug, playing with a kitten, and telling him her philosophy of life—Love, a Home, and a Child—often wondered at the difference now. And yet it was not that her philosophy itself had changed. It had only widened.

And Inskip's had widened with it. He had learned

with the last two years of his mental growth that a home was not merely a house with furniture in it, in which one lived with one's wife after the appointed order of things; that love was a thing of infinite sacrifices, even though of infinite delights; that a child might be ever-present in a childless home, even as it might be non-existent in a nursery—for where the Spirit of Eternal Youth dwells, there, always, is the invisible Child-Spirit.

Margaret and her boy-prince had possessed each factor of that trinity for which the girl possessing it had craved. Moralists would have denied furiously that such a thing were possible. But then moralists have a fatal incapacity to see the wood for the trees. The trees in the case were ugly enough—typifying the maze of riot and of allurements which never provides an exit comparable with the beauty of its entrance—but the wood, behind and around it all, was a lovely thing. It held every charm, and every innocent delight; but it was not, after the manner of woods, well-lighted. And in it these children lost their way.

Inskip's marriage had not led him to any such wood; nor had he the temperament to have been very happy in it indefinitely—for even woods have their ending, and Inskip's tragedy was that he had not the God-given quality of lingering by the way. Instead, he took gigantic strides, covering long distances, rushing, with headstrong folly—impelled, he knew not by what, to seek the Beautiful Beyond.

And he had not, in this case, found the Beyond beautiful.

If he had been asked to mix the ingredients of an ideal wife himself, and if he had responded to so difficult a request, the result would have been something that Iris would never have recognised as Iris, but that Hugh would have known to be Iris—differently focussed.

He could have been intensely happy with a Margaret of no dubious experiences; and he could have been even happier with an Iris bereft of her disingenuousness—for her gentleness, her purity of mind, and her imaginativeness, made a marvellously appealing call on his own chivalry. But the Margaret-type always would have its experiences; and the Iris-type would always be (more or less) disingenuous.

And the Inskip type would always desire the unattainable.

Sometimes, when he had a wild fit on him, he longed to take his pensive little wife and shake her (none too gently), and say to her, "Drop it: drop this infernal posing. For God's sake be natural. Let us go out into the wilderness together and be tempted of the devil" (or something equally exotic). He wondered what Iris would do. He thought she probably would remark that she had often had such feelings herself, and it was the weather.

For he never had a thought, and he never had a feeling that his wife, in some marvellous manner, had not already had. In the beginning Mr. Inskip had been impressed by these peculiar coincidences, but in the end it was otherwise. He sought relief in keeping his thoughts and feelings entirely to himself. When Iris lost her cue, she, too, became silent, with lamen-

table results—for the vacancy in her life resulting from this was soon filled by speculations on her husband's relations with Mrs. Stair.

The result of it all on Hugh was that he not only lost his vision of the Divine Flame, but he also fell, in his worse moments, into the unforgiveable sin of telling himself that there was no Divine Flame at all anywhere, save in the imagination of inexperienced young people. His work lost the touch of inspiration that had redeemed its cold brilliancy; it became like a diamond where once it had resembled fire. He substituted phraseology for fantasy, and psychology for passion; he became a man of letters where hitherto he had been a man of ideas. And he found it much easier.

But the whole time the man's soul was smouldering within him with a fire that would not be exhausted. He was "one of those outsiders—poor devils—who know all the while it's a dream, and who burn with a fire of their own creation."

There was one joy, however, which still remained untainted for him. If the ideal wife were impossible, the ideal child held every possibility. Hugh dreamed daily of his son that was to be.

The little straight-backed fellow was to have honest brown eyes, and to be a desperately matter-of-fact infant from the first. Hugh thought that, when the proper time arrived, he would suggest to Iris that the baby should be given a food with plenty of starch in it. "For a kid can't develop high-falutin' notions on starch," thought poor Inskip, who was terribly afraid his son would inherit his own disposition—or his wife's.

The little fellow, two, should be told nothing about fairies, or Hans Andersen, or Peter Pan. He should be given the ugliest Teddy bear his father could find when he could hold it; and after that he should have soldiers, and after that clever mechanical trains.

But, above all, young Mr. Inskip was to be trained to a desperate sincerity.

Hugh spent many hours of every day pondering over this apotheosis of the ordinary. This afternoon, as he sat smoking, he thought again of the infinite delight a child can bring into a life that is rather sad. He closed his eyes, and felt soft wee fingers clutching at his own; on his mouth was a baby's flower-like little mouth; on his shoulder a tiny, curly head.

Iris, in her bedroom, could hear him pacing up and down, could even imagine she saw his face—which, perhaps, it was as well she did not, for the man, momentarily, was off-guard. Soon she heard him walk quietly past her door (he had always a delightful belief that she was asleep); next, she heard the hall door closing.

Much of his conversation had been Arabic to her that afternoon; not because she had no imagination, but because she had too much. The allusion to Mrs. Stair had been the match that lit the conflagration. Hugh's graphic description of the remarkable people found inside and outside the Ark had fallen on an intellect attuned to the correct response (at the correct interval); but all the while the man spoke, his wife, watching him, was thinking of another woman "who was in extraordinarily vivid touch with all the actualities of life."

Her thoughts travelled back to her first meetings with Hugh. She tried to re-capture the atmosphere, to analyse the subtle charm which, undoubtedly, at that time he had found in her. But, with a throb of infinite pain, she realised that, even then, it had been a thing more of suggestion than of actuality. The romance of night; a girl who was refined, looked innocent, did unconventional things; Hugh's own instincts, which were extraordinarily dispassionate.

Her mind hovered over the last word, and rejected it. Hugh had passion enough—the passion which can burn so cruelly, so unceasingly. She herself had aroused it, but she could never satisfy it. For it was the passion so entirely, so remorselessly, independent of all physical in man—the passion of his intellect.

All through her married life she had intrigued with that sexless problem, using the infinite resources of the courtesan of the mind. She had chased the Will-o'-the-wisp, while herself in the guise of the pursued. She had invented mysteries, hinted at subtleties, dressed her soul in strange and lurid garments and placed it in windows and at street-corners whither her husband hourly would pass.

And the result? He had ignored, gently but firmly, the mystery. He had been profoundly unimpressed by the gay colouring. Once or twice, when she had been unusually persistent, he had laughed with the gay insolence of the rejector.

And yet she knew, on the simpler, finer, primitive ground she held him still. She would be the mother of his first-born—that weapon in the hand of a woman with which she can face all her enemies. He might

not be impressed by the quality of her mind, but he was intensely, almost terribly agitated over the peril that lay in wait for her body. Which, alas! was an agitation she found positively disconcerting.

She would infinitely have preferred that Hugh should have ignored the entire matter, and should have fixed his eyes (and hers) on the stars. (For that her husband should think one son of infinitely greater value than many stars was a fact which her somewhat indolent cleverness had never quite grasped.)

That afternoon, and more than ever, did she envy Margaret Stair.

A week afterwards Mr. Inskip again became pre-occupied with the mysterious manuscript which he had never shown to his wife.

"When is Mrs. Stair coming back to town?" Iris asked, indifferently.

"She came back two days ago," he replied.

"Is she looking better?" (This was Mrs. Inskip's method of enquiry.)

"I haven't seen her yet."

She gave him one glance—and thought he lied.

Two days afterwards she intercepted a letter—the first thing of the kind she had ever done. It was a painful task, for her instincts of taste were refined, but in such matters the way is sometimes made easy by a wonderfully understanding second self.

Iris felt she was doing the right (though obnoxious) thing. This constant suspicion was very worrying. Her mental unrest could not be good for her, and it could not be good for the child for whom Hugh had

so ardent a feeling. It were better to set her mind at rest, once and for ever.

Unfortunately her mind was not set at rest. For this is what she read :

"You adorable person,—I believe you are right, after all. There never was anybody who understood me a quarter so well. I will come to your office to-morrow, and have a long argument with you. I can't possibly wait till Sunday, as you suggest.—Elöise."

When Mr. Inskip returned that night to dinner he found his wife altogether charming. In her soft white gown, with a gold fillet in her hair, she looked a mere child. He could not, apparently, take his eyes off her.

"You seem to like me very much this evening," she said later, and she smiled sweetly—as is the miraculous habit of women whose hearts are on fire with indignation.

"I am positively enthralled by you," he said, eagerly. (And, indeed, he looked it!)

"I wonder why," Iris said gently, watching—watching, all the while.

At another time his subsequent conduct would have driven her to distraction, but to-night it only seemed to her a proof positive of his guilt. He gazed at her with eyes which certainly were not calm. Then he got up, and laughed—rather unsteadily.

"This . . . won't do," he said. "I'm off for a long walk. You trot away to bed and get some sleep."

And he actually walked off, and did not re-appear till midnight!

At one time during the night Iris thought she would get a divorce.

At another she made up her mind to commit suicide, and to leave a note which would explain—many matters.

But by breakfast time she had become more her real self, and had determined to be at Hugh's office that afternoon.

The idea had come to her in one brilliant flash with the sunrise, but it was not until noon that the flash became incarnate, and took on the flesh and blood of a definite scheme. Iris, at first, thought merely of calling casually at her husband's office during the afternoon, of finding the suspected couple together, and of leaving following events to Fate.

By luncheon the lack of subtlety in the plan had wearied her into almost renouncing it altogether. Suppose Margaret Stair, with the cunning and cleverness of a woman versed in disguise, were to pass off the visit as a business one, leaving the jealous wife as an object of ridicule? It was too likely this would happen. Iris knew women (by which she meant she knew herself).

It was with a half-conceived plan in her subtle brain that she arrived at the little office in Buckingham Street between three and four that afternoon. She had a duplicate key of the room, a key which Hugh (most misguided of men) had once given to her with the remark: "This unlocks my Bluebeard's chamber. I do what that gentleman most certainly should have done. I give you the key of it. Moreover, I take you there myself."

The little room was a shade more dusty than usual. The time was midway between the hours when the

charlady dusted from the table to the floor, and the office-boy swept back again from the floor to the table. Iris, fastidious and resentful, looked round disgustedly.

In one corner of the office was a black and gold screen; in another corner a thick grey curtain veiled a recess. Iris looked behind it: there, in all their wintry suggestion, were a copper scuttle of coals, a brass fire-guard, and a pair of Hugh's boots, white with dust.

She dropped the curtain, and shuddered.

The screen hid nothing. It merely stood there, flaunting its gold-thread peacocks and flamingoes. Iris pulled it a shade further forward, and carefully observed it.

Then she placed a small office-stool in the angle formed by the screen; went behind it, and sat thereon.

She had not long to wait in the locked-up room. Her husband was the first to enter. She heard his whistle on the stairs, then the quick, decisive click of the key. He passed so close to the screen that she feared he would hear the wild beating of her heart.

Now that the adventure really had begun she wished with all her soul she were out of it. Something within her, something which was her greatest friend, cried to her to leave her hiding-place, and go to her husband, and tell him everything. But, as she wavered, the friend turned into a mere relation (by marriage), and suggested she should come from behind the screen and pretend she had hidden there for a joke. And even as her heart leaped at the idea—which was very characteristic of herself—her enemy was taking the field, and commanding her to stay where she was.

Hugh, whom between the wooden joints of the screen she could see perfectly, was looking a shade nervous, she thought, and was whistling disjointedly.

His first action was to rustle amongst some papers on the desk. After he had arranged them, he lit a spirit-lamp and placed a small kettle thereon, from which his wife inferred he was going to make tea.

And then she was glad—wholly glad—she had come. The simple, domestic little act aroused all that was bad in her. She rejoiced that she had decided on this unveiling of the inner secret of her husband's life—the husband who at this moment was preparing tea for her rival.

He was cutting bread and butter now; very badly, and with many observations of wrath at the bluntness of the knife.

Then she heard a tap-tap coming along the passage. It was Margaret Stair's stick. She would have known the sound among a thousand such . . .

Hugh flung open the door, loaf in hand. There was a merry burst of laughter in the most musical of voices.

Then: "*Ah, my Boris, now are we no more to part!*" was what Iris heard in a voice with a long drawn-out sob in it.

"*Elöise! Elöise!*" Was that cry her husband's? It had all the passion of her own wayward heart, and all the strength of manhood in its tone.

And then in a second, with a flash of intuition, she understood the situation . . . understood it, even before Margaret Stair's merry laugh, or Inskip's "*Heigho! now for tea!*"

In a short time Mrs. Inskip was to go through the physical anguish of motherhood, with its torture and its glory ; but nothing that she then would endure was to be compared to the misery and the burning shame which were hers at that moment.

If only she could slip away unnoticed. If only Hugh and Margaret would become absorbed in their conversation, and oblivious to all else. The screen was not far from the door—if only escape were possible!

But it was not. She had to remain in the Hades of her own creating, with her heart's wild beating for company . . . afraid to move, afraid to breathe.

"You know, Hughie," Mrs. Stair was saying, as she drank her tea, "you've made Elöise so poignant, so biting a sketch, that she's almost beyond me."

"In saying that you underrate your capacity for suffering."

"I can *suffer*, God knows," said the beautiful voice. "But Elöise suffers and is *strong*."

"That is the primary aim of suffering—its only excuse."

"What about its softening effect?"

"Suffering softens many—but it drives more mad."

"You think that gentler humanity is a mistaken sequence after terrible mental sorrow?"

"It is embraced in the greater attribute of strength. A strong man can be very gentle, you know."

"I can't help thinking you've made Elöise a shade too hard."

"There are moments in life," said Inskip, slowly,

"when the only possible course (consistent with sanity) is to set one's teeth in a vice and *go on*."

Mrs. Stair was silent for some moments. Iris could see her face distinctly through the chinks of the screen. It was meditative; the beautiful eyes stared sombrely into space, the mouth had a pathetic droop.

Inskip, too, looked unlike himself—himself as his wife knew him. Iris noticed the mental alertness on the long dark face; the nervous tension so evident in the poise of the head; the way he gazed at Margaret.

"John Austen makes a very satisfactory Boris," Margaret said, a few minutes later. "I feel I could cheerfully go to hell for him—and that's a lovely feeling for a woman."

"Women," said Mr. Inskip, with some warmth, "rarely, if ever, go to hell for a man."

There was a rustle of silk; an indignant "Hughie! you *brute*."

"They go to hell in crowds—because they *want* to. Which is not the same thing."

"*Oh!*"

"Indeed, it is a matter for serious question whether they even recognise their destination—such is the glamour thrown over them by irresistible man."

Margaret Stair laughed, somewhat ruefully.

"One hears sometimes," she ventured; "I suppose it is exaggerated . . . but one *does* hear of Irresistible Woman."

"Women," said Mr. Inskip, amiably, "have a pretty little way of pointing to Heaven and saying, 'Follow Me.'"

"Then it is one out of several other—pretty—little habits of theirs."

"In them lies hidden the Eternal Mother."

"There is a Society kept fairly busy with the idiosyncrasies of the Eternal Motherhood."

"You cannot judge the whole by an infinitesimal part."

"Now you are talking like Euclid," said Mrs. Stair, "and that is a thing I cannot possibly allow."

"I am talking rubbish because I don't want to discuss Elöise with you."

"But I appointed this interview specially to ask you to make her more *human*."

"She's humanity itself"

"Well, more womanly."

"She's an excellent example of fine womanhood."

"Let her waver a bit, Hughie. Let her cry."

"Never a tear."

"It will be a perfect frost up in the gallery."

"Not with *you* as Elöise," Mr. Inskip said, gallantly.

Mrs. Stair rose slowly from the low chair she had been half-sitting, half-lying upon throughout the interview.

"Well, then, help me into the lift. I thought you would have acceded to a poor cripple's request."

Iris could see the quick look of pain that crossed her husband's face. It revealed to her, in the space of a moment, the whole story of his friendship with Margaret Stair. She crouched lower on her stool, her heart burning with shame of herself—that cruellest, most wounding of all the shames.

And, as she bent lower, her head in her hands, a

stiff gold ornament that stood up high in her hat pressed hard against the screen with three distinct taps. She raised her head suddenly, aflame with fear, and there was a long scratch of the tinselly ornament against the woodwork.

She sat, ice-cold, sick with terror, her hands clasped—afraid to breathe.

"What an extraordinary noise," said Margaret Stair.

Inskip was nearer the screen than she. He was silent for a second, and, when he spoke, his voice was curiously quiet.

"We are bothered with mice to a fearful extent in the panelling."

Margaret gave a little scream.

"Then this is no place for me," she cried. "Hughie, what on earth do you suppose would happen if I saw a mouse? I can't even run."

"It will not come from behind the screen," Inskip replied, and his voice now sounded weary. "It is more frightened than you."

"Give me my scarf, and ring for the lift."

He put out his arm, but she waved it aside gaily, and, leaning on her stick, walked slowly from the room—a pathetic, beautiful figure. Inskip accompanied her in the lift, helped her into her waiting motor, and then returned to his office.

He stood for a second beside the table, collecting his papers. Then he stood for one long moment by the window, looking out, seeing nothing . . . then he went away.

His wife's heart was beating to suffocation. She could hear the lift whirring downstairs. She came

from behind the screen, and rushed to the window. Hugh was striding up Buckingham Street towards the Strand at a furious rate.

What a marvellous escape had been hers! She felt as if never before had she known what thankfulness was. What would he have done if he had looked behind the screen . . . what would have happened?

And then for a second a chill overcame her at the thought: for, after all, *what* would he have done? Her husband's methods were curious sometimes.

As she remembered this, she was trying to unlock the door. The key would not turn. Her heart leaped again. Suppose she could not get out!

But even as the fear swept over her she realised the explanation.

The door was unlocked. He husband had never locked it.

Again she had that sensation of sickening dread, and again she combated it. Hugh was a thoughtless, forgetful, harem-scarem sort of a creature. It was the most likely thing in the world that he would forget to lock up his office.

As she crossed the threshold to Buckingham Street she saw the motor waiting.

And then she *knew*.

The chauffeur touched his cap, and opened the door.

"Did your master tell you to wait for me?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

Hugh was not in the house when she entered it. The hour was nearly seven, and she rang for her maid.

"Madame looks lovely vid dat colour," Seraphine murmured ecstatically, as she brushed out the long coils of sunny hair.

"I will wear black to-night," said Mrs. Inskip.

"And the pearls, Madame?"

"No."

When she was dressed she dismissed the maid, and lay down on a couch in her room, waiting for Hugh's footsteps.

He was rarely late for dinner, and he never let her dine alone, however many were his occupations. She lay there—wondering.

What should she say? How excuse herself? How draw a picturesque veil over the ugliness? If only the motor had not been waiting, and the door unlocked! Then she could have gone to him with a voluntary confession: but now—now it was the only thing left.

But even as she thought this, her other self was telling her that, if she had had any doubt of her husband's knowledge, she never would have told him.

Then she heard his footsteps coming along the passage. He was going to his dressing-room. She rose hurriedly from the couch and moved towards the door, her soft black draperies falling round her. She caught a reflection of her face in the mirror. Seraphine was right: she *was* looking lovely to-night.

She tapped lightly.

"Come in," said her husband's voice.

CHAPTER VII

INSKIP was standing before his dressing-table, wrestling with his tie, when his wife entered. His great height was accentuated by his attitude; his back looked longer, broader, more forbidding than usual.

Iris crossed the room, and stood beside him. He turned politely; but he did not look at her.

"Hugh," said the girl, "Hugh, I've come to beg you to forgive me."

He pushed a chair forward, and beckoned to her to sit down. She caught a glimpse of his face—it was neither angry nor hard; but over it, like a grey mantle, was spread a great weariness. He looked like a man who had been through an ordeal of physical, mental, and moral strength.

Iris wished he would *strike* her, would pour forth contempt, would do anything rather than *accept* her as she was.

"You—you knew I was behind the screen," she faltered.

He turned his face away from her.

"Yes," was all he said, and his voice was very weary.

"You heard my hat scratching the woodwork, and then you saw me?"

"No, I did not see you."

Iris turned to him passionately. "But you knew no one but your wife would play so mean a trick! You knew it *must* be I?"

He did not reply to her question, all he said was:

"I knew you were in the room before you made a sound."

She looked at him, genuinely startled.

"How did you know?"

The man was fastening his sleeve-links, and spoke with his head bent. His voice was muffled and dull.

"I knew almost directly I entered the room," he said.

"How?"

"I think by the scent you use . . . but not altogether."

Then she caught a glimpse of his face. It was the face of a man who is being tortured.

"What else told you I was there?" she asked, and her voice was hardly above a whisper.

He did not reply for some minutes, but she did not ask him again, for she saw he was only waiting to formulate his answer—perhaps so that he should hurt her as little as possible. When he did speak it was slowly, almost as though he were feeling for words.

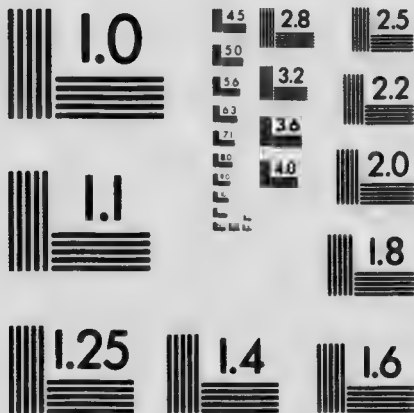
"It was before I was even aware of the scent. I can't explain, and you . . . would not understand. A man is very conscious of his wife's presence at a time when over them both hangs a great peril. If she is not quite normal physically, he is abnormal mentally . . . when he has loved her. . . ."

He paused, and for the first time since she met him she saw his hand tremble. Then he went on.



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"I had not crossed the threshold, closed the door, before I *knew* my wife was in the room."

"Why did you not speak? Why did you not save me from myself?" she cried, passionately.

He looked at her. He made no reply.

"Speak!" she cried again. "Why did you let me stay and do a shameful thing?"

"It was the only thing to do."

She thought she understood him. "You mean you saved me from Mrs. Stair's contempt? But if you had been quick she need never have known. *Was* that what you meant?"

"No."

"What then?"

"You had to learn a lesson. You chose your school yourself. It is the most ignoble of all the schools, but some of its lessons bite and burn into the soul."

And then she understood.

She flung herself on the couch, and buried her face in her hands.

"If I could only die, if I could only die," she cried.

He came over and stood beside her.

"You *must* keep calm," he said, and his voice was stern.

She controlled herself with a great effort, "I suppose you will always despise me now," she cried, bitterly.

"I think it is an infinite pity you allow yourself to do certain things."

There was an inexpressible reserve, an unutterable weariness in his voice. The girl had a curious sensation of this being no new discovery on her husband's part. It seemed as if this afternoon's misadventure

had been merely a *da capo* in a different key of much that had made discord in the duet of their married life.

She turned on him with an involuntary question.

"When you knew I was behind the screen were you surprised?"

She was looking at him, and she saw his whole body quiver with an irresistible impulse of distaste. He spoke abruptly, almost savagely:

"For God's sake don't ask these intolerable questions!"

"But I *must* know. I am ill with wretchedness."

He glanced at her quickly. Even now she could see he had a nervous uneasiness as to the harm this might do to her.

"I was not—surprised," he said.

She flushed to the roots of her hair.

"Did you see me at your desk the day you left for Germany?"

"Yes," he answered, and turned his face so that she could not watch it.

Iris got up from the sofa, and put her hands in his. He did not hold them; he simply allowed them to remain there.

"Hugh, let me confess."

"An obligatory confession," he remarked, dryly, "has not the virtue of an unwilling reticence."

"Hugh—I was madly jealous of you and Mrs. Stair."

His face showed no surprise, only a profound distaste for the whole subject.

"It was the only inference I could draw from this

afternoon," he said, "but I hope that what you heard of our conversation killed that fallacy?"

"I've been a fool—a *fool*!" she sobbed.

Her piteous confession left him (apparently) wholly unmoved.

"Fools, though misguided, often make magnificent blunders," he said, "but they don't, *as fools*, hide behind screens."

"Then I'll call myself a wicked woman."

"Again your term is too hard."

"What would *you* call me?" the girl asked, suddenly.

"Almost inconceivably—sly," he answered.

The room seemed to rock beneath her feet. Was this *Hugh* talking—the quiet man who had never shown the faintest consciousness of her acts of treachery?

"Why did you not stop me before? Why did you let me go on?" she cried, bitterly.

He looked at her very gravely, and his answer had a touch of the inexorableness of Fate.

"Because you *had* to go on—to go on till you hurt yourself against the great rock. There's no stopping mid-way in the path you . . . *chose*."

It was strange, and the girl long afterwards remembered it, but this last word hurt her more profoundly than all else her husband had said. It was so true—and so pitiful.

She had, indeed, *chosen* her path. And for the first time in her life the veil she had wrapped around her inner self fell off and she saw straight. All her little subtleties took their true significance;

all her self-deceivings; all the contemptible disguises of an ignoble thing.

She buried her face in her hands.

Hugh turned to leave the room. As he did so he paused.

"Iris," he said.

She looked up quickly. What was coming?

"I intend entirely to break off this friendship that has caused you pain."

It was two days afterwards, and Iris had only seen her husband at meals, when he had been profoundly courteous, and (for him) extremely discursive—upon the political situation. She had sat opposite him, looking like a broken lily; an idea which had occurred to herself more than once, and, apparently to Inskip also, for he had risen and propped a cushion of soft purple silk behind her.

Iris had thanked him in her gentle, penitent voice, but even as she did so she had been conscious of a swift desire that he had given her the golden silk cushion, whose radiance so exactly matched the yellow stamens of the Madonna-lily.

After luncheon she went to her boudoir with a volume of Thomas à Kempis, from whose exalted maxims she had drawn much transitory comfort in the rectory days.

The footman stood at the door with a question that startled her.

"Are you at home this afternoon to Mrs. Stair, ma'am?"

Mrs. Inskip closed her book, and hesitated for the space of a second.

"Yes—but to no one else," she replied.

And then came that never-to-be-forgotten click of a stick along the passage. The footman, with a shade of warmest interest on his impassive and parchment-like face, flung open the door, and ushered in the most beautiful woman in London.

Iris was no longer like a broken lily. She crossed the room with gracious serenity, hand outstretched.

"This is the first time you have come to my little cottage," she said. "Now tell me exactly how to make you comfortable."

Margaret Stair's dark and expressive eyes held a momentary gleam of amusement, as though the words had for her a vein of humour.

"A cushion at my back; a hassock at my foot; and thou. And Buckingham Gate were paradise enough," she said. And sat down, a miracle of grace and fulness, on a sofa.

"This is not meant as a polite afternoon call," she added. "Did you think it was?"

Iris, thrown off her guard, hesitated and stumbled.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"This visit is the direct outcome of your visit of yesterday afternoon."

Mrs. Inskip felt herself grow crimson. For a moment she could not speak. Then she turned to her visitor in uncontrollable agitation.

"*So Hugh has told you?*" she cried, bitterly.

Across the beautiful face opposite flashed two distinct expressions. Margaret made no reply for

full minute. When she did there was a shade of fine contempt in her voice.

"Certainly you understand your husband—well," she remarked.

"Has he not told you?"

"No."

"Then who has?"

"No one told me, save yourself. I knew yesterday afternoon."

Iris turned to her in astonishment.

"You *knew*?"

"I did."

"But—but you thought it was a mouse."

Margaret Stair leaned forward, hand outstretched.

"And shall I tell you why I said that? Because I saw the shame, the unspeakable *shame* on that poor boy's face. I am an actress, remember. I summoned all my faculties to the front."

"And Hugh does not know you know?"

"Thank God! he doesn't. It would be his last straw."

"Oh!" cried poor Iris. "*Oh!*" And she buried her crimson face in her hands. "I thought I suffered hell's last torment yesterday—but what is this?"

"What you are suffering now is mere child's play to the torture your husband endured yesterday."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because it's true. There are some natures that could infinitely better bear self-contempt than—than the contempt *he* endured yesterday. Your nature I should say, was one of them. But his——" she stopped abruptly.

"Ah," cried Iris, bitterly, "what you say might be true, if it were the first time yesterday."

"You mean——?"

"He's caught me doing these things before."

Margaret gave the girl a long look that comprised pity, amazement, and a shade of contempt.

"What strikes me most, as a woman and an actress, is the sheer *stupidity* of it."

"Stupidity?"

"You loved him? You wanted him to love you?"

The girl uncovered her face, and turned it to her questioner. The two pairs of eyes met. It was answer enough.

"Then why didn't you drink, flirt, nag, write books, become a district visitor, choose any indiscretion that a nature like your husband's would be able to understand?"

"Because I was so miserably jealous that I could not overcome it."

Mrs. Stair laughed—with some bitterness. "There have been jealous women before your time," she said. "But, thank God! He sometimes makes it impossible for them to hide behind screens."

"Don't you *understand*?"

"No, I don't. Why should all women be credited with a comprehension of the meanness of some?"

"If you had been I, what would you have done?"

"You must remember," said Mrs. Stair, "that I am somewhat in the dark as to the data for your jealousy. Tell me what you had found out." There was subtle irony in her voice.

"I knew Hugh constantly went to your flat to see you."

The beautiful face of the woman on the sofa grew soft.

"Hughie knew what a hell of depression I sometimes endure," she said. "He also knew he was a form of tonic to me. And, in the third place, he is writing me a play."

"I didn't know—I didn't know," cried poor Iris.

"And yet you have an imagination! Some women's imagination should be docked in their infancy, much as they dock a dog's tail. Well—anything else?"

"He went to Germany for three days . . . you were there."

Margaret Stair turned on her sofa. She seemed to have difficulty in tempering the warmth of her indignation to the powers of endurance of her white and fragile hostess.

"I neither knew he was in the country, nor saw him, Mrs. Inskip. I—I can hardly speak calmly on this subject. You married a man of good-breeding, a man of your own caste, and you thought him capable of leaving the prospective mother of his child for a petty infidelity with another woman. Don't you understand that to act in such a manner, at such a time, would be an impossibility to a *gentleman*? That's a hateful, snobbish word, but at least it serves to explain what I mean."

"And—and then I read your letter making the appointment in Buckingham Street."

"That was a *bestly* thing to do," said Mrs. Stair, warmly.

"Well, am I not being punished for it?"

"Hughie is suffering infinitely more than you."

"Oh," cried Iris, passionately, "sometimes I wish I *weren't* so straight!"

Mrs. Stair was silent for a moment. When she spoke, her words came slowly and with deep meaning.

"Never wish that," she said. "I cannot explain things very well, but you would be infinitely worse off, if Hughie were not what he is. There is no hardness in the world comparable with the hardness of a man or a woman when either discovers his *own* sin in another. If Hughie had done mean, treacherous things, he would have been *adamant* when he discovered a little bit of himself in you. Your husband shares your suffering, and takes the bigger half himself; that other man would have made you suffer to your last drop of blood—but he would have gone on in his own way, rejoicing."

"How is it you understand all these things?"

"I'm twenty-eight. I've known many women and more men . . . and I have suffered." Her face quivered for a moment. "That was the great bond between your husband and me," she ended. "He knew."

"Why didn't you two marry?" Iris cried passionately. "You are both fine characters. You are both clever. You are both fascinating. Why didn't he fix on a girl who does the things I do?"

"Because he loved you."

"Every time I saw you before my marriage—even now when I look at you I think—how can any man be with you long, and not love you?"

"I daresay Hughie does love me, but not in the way you mean—never in the way you mean."

"It seems incredible when I look at myself and you."

"You've got something I parted with long, long ago," Margaret Stair said slowly.

"What is that?"

"Even now you still possess a certain amount of it. But last year, when Hughie first met you, you had the most unawakened look I've ever seen on a young girl's face. So many possibilities seemed there—locked-up. Hughie was frightfully interested in you."

"But he found you more interesting."

"Not in the same way. I was a soiled thing. He never alluded to it afterwards, I don't believe he ever thought of it, but when he first met me I was keeping house for a Polish Prince."

Iris glanced at her in involuntary surprise. Margaret Stair gave her information so coolly, so unemotionally.

"But for my accident I might have been doing much the same sort of thing now."

"Oh," cried Iris, "why do you tell me these things when they must hurt you so dreadfully?"

"Because I want you to understand that, under no possible circumstances, would your husband have wanted to marry me. He is not the sort of man to desire another's leavings."

"Oh, don't, *don't!*"

"But I interested him even then, and he was immensely impressed by my acting; and after my accident, when Alexis took his departure, Hughie used

to come and see me nearly every day. He was frightfully sorry for me. Now do you understand?"

"Yes," said Iris, "I've been a *fool*, a *fool*."

"Hughie isn't a woman's man, and he's not what is generally known as a man's man, either—though he can arouse great enthusiasm in his own sex. He's the most egoistical person I ever met, in one way . . . and he used to be extraordinarily childlike."

"Used to be?"

"He is losing many of his childlike beliefs. Well, you know, you yourself must have taught him several things."

Iris bit a quivering lip. Margaret Stair could be very, very cruel.

"Yes," the beautiful voice continued, "you look so gentle, so reserved, so childlike and innocent, and yet those little hands have done the work of iron in remoulding a man's nature."

Iris hid her tortured face in the cushion. Mrs. Stair rose slowly to her feet, and limped painfully across the room.

"I will go now. You want to have a good cry. I expect I have sounded cruel, but, strange to say, I meant to be kind. I still like you very much, though you have been crediting me with the blackest treachery."

Iris put out her little hand, but she did not look at the woman.

Margaret Stair paused a moment before grasping it warmly.

"And you will win Hughie back through his fatherhood . . . you lucky, *lucky* girl!" she said.

CHAPTER VIII

MARGARET STAIR'S last words rang in Mrs. Inskip's ears for many days. There had been in them a tone at once vital, painful, heartbreaking, triumphant. Iris felt, and not for the first time, that there is no human friend a woman can depend on comparable with grim old Mother Nature—brutal though some of her methods may be.

Her husband was excessive; tactful, "remorselessly" tactful, Iris thought, these days. He kept out of the way as much as possible; he seemed to understand that their meeting was a pain to her. He bought her a large supply of music, including all the newest comic operas; he kept her rooms supplied with softly perfumed flowers; and he ordered a great number of new books—none of which in the least resembled Jane Austen's.

But he kept out of her way.

At first Iris was thankful for this. She could not speak to him without burning all over with shame. She could not meet his eyes (indeed, he never looked at her to give her the chance to do so); if he came suddenly into the room where she was, she felt faint.

But this abnormal and unnatural supersensitiveness passed. And then the real painfulness of the situation

gripped her. Hugh, most undoubtedly, was a changed man, trying to disguise the fact.

It was then that their life together under the same roof became a horror to the girl. There was something in the entire and absolute restraint of it all that stifled her. She felt she could not breathe in the refrigerated atmosphere her husband had created; and yet, all the while, she knew that she used the wrong metaphor—it was she, herself, who had created the situation.

It was a week after Mrs. Stair's visit that she tapped at Hugh's study door.

He was not writing as she opened it. He was lying on the low divan, smoking. There was no litter of papers on the table. It was evident he had not been working. But on his dark, inscrutable face was a look Iris had never yet seen there. It passed before she had closed the door, but it told her, with no possibility of a doubt, that he was in a little hell of his own.

He got up from the divan, and motioned to her to be seated.

Iris demurred.

"You looked so comfortable," she said. And the irony of her words made a faint smile light up her eyes.

"Lolling is bad for my figure," he replied, imperturbably. "Also, though I'm an uncouth bear at the best of times, I'm not going to occupy the one comfortable seat in the room when my wife honours me with a visit."

She sat down obediently. Hugh perched himself on the table and looked amiably polite.

"How are you sleeping now?" he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I am thankful for small mercies in that way," she told him.

Across his strong face there passed a wave of pity. "Poor child," he murmured, half-inaudibly.

But the tenderness in his voice was no comfort to the girl who heard it. She knew she had lost for ever one sacred tie in the bond of married life. Pity was a mean substitute for complete trust.

"Hugh," she cried, brokenly, "I can't bear this any more."

"It won't be much longer," he said, getting abruptly off the table, and walking restlessly up and down the room, his hands in his pockets.

"I don't mean what you mean."

He stopped in his restless pacing, and looked inquiringly at her.

"Perhaps," Iris faltered, "if the circumstances were different, I might better be able to bear the consequences of what I've done. But as it is . . . as it is, I haven't the strength."

"What do you mean? What do you mean?" He was as agitated as she was.

"Feeling you are in the house. Meeting you every day. Speaking to you. Seeing your face. Knowing what I am."

"Do you mean you wish me to keep rigidly to my own apartments?"

"I mean I want you to go right away—until it's all over."

"*Iris!*"

There was a blank amazement in his voice.

"I might bear your scorn, if I weren't unnerved as it is. But, being ill and weary, it's the one drop too much."

He knelt down beside the divan, more agitated than she had ever seen him.

"What do you mean by *bearing my scorn*?" he asked, sternly. "When have I ever taken that attitude with you?"

"But I *know* it. It's not an attitude one can describe by words, but it's true." She turned towards him. "Is it not *true*?" she asked.

"It is not true."

And, looking at him, she could only acquiesce in his statement. There was no scorn in the long dark face; the eyes met hers steadily enough and told her so. But over every feature that she loved so unutterably was a great weariness—an immeasurable disappointment. She could better have borne his contempt.

"Oh, Hugh," she cried, involuntarily. "It is wicked of me—but I wish my treachery had discovered what it sought."

He looked at her.

She covered her face with her hands.

"If I had only found out that you *had* lied to me, *had* deceived me about Margaret, I could have borne it better than—*this*"

Inskip stood beside the divan, but he did not touch her.

"It's always difficult to understand the workings of a woman's brain," he said, "but sometimes it's impossible."

"I will explain. If I had found what I sought, it would have brought you nearer to what I am."

"You mean it would have been a link forging together the worst in both of us. Is that it?"

"Yes: it would have been a link."

He laughed.

"Is that woman's logic?"

"It's human nature."

He shook his head.

"You're *wrong*. Let me tell you what human nature really is. If I had been the sort of man to lie to you, if I had spent these months which have meant suffering and weariness to you in a guilty friendship with another woman, if you had discovered it by trickery—don't you see I could never have forgiven you? Don't you know that fundamental principle that, though we sometimes forgive others their trespasses, we never forgive those we've trespassed against?"

It might have been Mrs. Stair herself speaking! A week ago Iris would have brooded over the coincidence, and drawn mean conclusions; now she simply accepted the fact that, on the big questions of life, big natures thought alike.

"I have spoken of the man," her husband continued, "and, don't you see that, far from drawing the woman closer, the treachery would for ever have rankled in her mind? Nature piles a lot of suffering down on a woman,"—his voice trembled slightly—"a man has to stand apart and look on—but the least he can do meanwhile is to play the game." . . . He took hold of her hand for a moment, and held it very firmly. . . .

"Iris, Human Nature is a damned queer thing, and a damned *dirty* thing sometimes, but even the divorce courts don't often show cases where it plays foul at a time like . . . this."

He dropped her hand abruptly.

"Hugh," cried the girl, passionately, "Hugh, will you ever forgive me?"

She saw his face alter—the weary look chase across it.

"It's nothing to do with forgiveness," he said.

"Shall you ever feel again for me what you once felt?"

He began to pace restlessly up and down the room again, and made no reply.

"Shall you ever—love—me again?"

"This sort of thing has nothing to do with what you mean when you talk of love," he said.

"Shall you ever respect me again?"

He turned on her almost savagely.

"For *God's* sake don't ask these awful questions!"

"You have answered my question," the girl said.

There was total silence. Inskip was standing like a statue in the middle of the room, his eyes half-closed, every muscle taut and tense. Iris watched him.

"And that is why I want you to leave me for a time," she said, slowly.

He turned on her in utter amazement.

"What do you mean by 'for a time'?" he enquired.

"Until . . . our child is two or three months old."

Suddenly he laughed—violently, discordantly, and ended as suddenly as he began.

"Of course, you are joking," he said. "I try to appreciate it."

"I am in deadly and absolute earnest."

"Then you must be mad. I do not mean to be discourteous. You are having a trying time, and your mental balance is shifted by a hair's breadth. . . . And that's all that's ever needed in a woman to produce chaos," he added, serenely.

"I am absolutely sane. But if you stay on here, if I have to go through this agony every day, I shall not be sane long."

He looked uneasily at her, and then evidently resolved on retaining his tactics of a gentie irony.

"You won't have to go through this agony every day. And, remember, even to-day's was self-inflicted."

"Hugh, you say *cruel* things."

He was penitent immediately, knelt down beside her, and took her hand.

"You see," he said, lamely, "I am trying to be funny."

"Trying to be funny!"

"Perhaps I'm a bit muddled. Isn't it funny they tell us to be when in contact with a person in extreme mental agitation?"

"No," Iris said, bitterly, "they tell you to fling cold water over them."

"I am not going to fling cold water over my wife—and, incidentally, over my manuscripts," Mr. Inskip remarked, cheerfully.

"Hugh, can't you see I'm not hysterical? Can't you see I'm in deadly earnest—perhaps for the first time in my life?"

He looked at her steadily.

"You may *think* you are," he said, slowly; "but, personally, I should doubt it."

"You talk as if I were a baby."

He smiled at her, very kindly, and with that air of complete detachment which had been growing so surely into a part of himself for the last few months.

"Like most women," he said, "you are unable to distinguish between the feelings that throb and burn within you to-day, and those that will fizzle and die out to-morrow."

"These feelings have been burning within me for a week."

"Then," observed Mr. Inskip, "the cold water plan has merits."

"You've been adopting that plan ever since I entered this room."

"Oh?"

The old weariness was creeping back into his voice. Iris felt with a sudden bitter pain that he was very, very sick of the whole subject; that he wanted to be alone; away from her, and all the sordid things she did. And it was at that moment that what hitherto had been merely an idle whim became a burning desire. She *would* arouse, if for the last time, his interest. She would create, if for the last time, an unusual situation. She would *make* him think of her.

She stirred uneasily on the divan; again there was the twinge of a curiously inelastic conscience. It seemed never to be able to adapt itself to the extraordinarily acute needs of its tortured possessor. Iris

had often lately wished that she could substitute for her conscience a really excellent digestion.

"Hugh," she said in a few minutes, "do you know that, for the last week, I have only slept two hours a night?"

He looked miserable.

"It's abominable," he muttered, "simply abominable."

Iris watched his face, but on it she could only read the distress of a tender-hearted man who cannot bear to know of the torture of a weaker vessel.

"I'll fetch in Gore-Jones to see you," he said, suddenly. "He won't let you take a sleeping-draught, but he may suggest something."

"Sir Edward can't give me what I want."

"*Could anyone?*" her husband asked, rather bitterly.

"Yes—you could."

"Tell me what I can do."

Iris leaned forward on the divan, and beckoned to him to come closer. He knelt beside her. The sleek black head was on a level with her hand; she stroked it gently. The simple action brought an almost overwhelming desire for tears. Hugh looked so extraordinarily *young* at that moment: his very question was the eternal question of youth.

"*Tell* me what I can do," he repeated.

"You can go away and leave me," Iris said, slowly.

"I can also throw stones at the Prime Minister's window," he said, with veiled irritability, "but I don't."

"Why won't you leave me for a time?"

He made no reply for fully a minute. His wife, whose dreamy eyes little escaped, watched his face

with intensest interest. He was evidently puzzling for an answer that would silence her demand. She wondered what, finally, he would say.

What he did say finally made her very angry.

"It's not the thing," he replied.

It was like iced water on her smarting soul—this answer. It told her so much of his comprehension of her intense veil of conventionality masquerading under a mirage of Bohemianism. And, like most of his comprehensions, it was so bitterly, biting, *true*. Even as she begged him to go her mind was dwelling on the possibility of a scandal.

Her eyes met his with something of the expression of a wounded deer. Inskip bit his lip . . . and looked away.

"I think, if you do not do what I ask, I shall never live to be a mother," Iris said, passionately.

He looked intolerably weary, and intolerably distressed. "You ask an outrageous and an impossible thing," he replied. "Try to grin and bear me."

"It is because I love you so much that I ask you to go."

"You have been reading Mr. Swinburne again, I feel sure of it," said poor Inskip, rising to his feet, and running his fingers through his hair rather distractedly.

"Why do you scoff at me?"

"For the same reason that one eats porridge with a spoon—it's the only thing to do."

"So you liken me to porridge—how like a man!"

"Iris, don't be foolish."

"How can I help being foolish?" Her voice broke on the last syllable,

"I think," said her husband, "that, if I were you, I would go to my room and get some sleep."

(Poor man! It was his invariable recipe for his wife's idiosyncrasies.)

Iris caught hold of his hand with a gesture that had a good deal of sincerity in it. She was feeling (at that moment) as if, never before, had she wanted anything so much as she wanted—this.

"Hugh," she cried, "Hugh, listen to me, put yourself in my place. Suppose you loved a woman with all your heart, and mind, and soul, and strength. Suppose she fascinated you into wickedness out of sheer jealousy. Suppose she found out you did mean, treacherous things, and yet you loved her more supremely than before. Wouldn't you long, at all costs, to get away out of her sight, where she could not be reminded of you daily—where she could not hear you, or see you, or speak to you?"

He stood thoughtfully stroking his black beard. He did not reply for a few minutes. Then he spoke deliberately.

"Marriage ties are very simple," he said, "and yet very intricate. They throw a loose enough girdle around two souls, and yet, behold! they run up every path and lane of their lives; so that, though one may go wandering up some road of delirious entrancement, lo! at the end comes a path pointing inexorably to the *return journey*."

"To the *return journey*?"

"Yes—the return journey. The eternal purpose of marriage is to bind together—not to separate."

"But when the situation has become temporarily intolerable?"

"The best cure is prevention. But in our case . . . Iris, what you suggest is madness."

"Haven't you any imagination? Don't you understand how this life rubs it in?"

For the first since their marriage she *saw* him lose patience. He turned swiftly, came to the divan, looked down on her with sternness.

"I speak to you as a woman," he said, "as a woman about to risk her life for the Eternal Purpose for which womanhood was created. And for God's sake I ask you to stop worrying about your own 'dirty little soul'—(I quote Kingsley," he interpolated—for his wife looked horrified)—"and to think of our child. What does anything else matter at a time like this—save the one great thing?"

"*And that is why I ask you to go,*" said Iris.

He gave her one startled, enquiring, piteous look. Then he stumbled to his feet, very white.

He walked to the window, stood there, leaned out. Then he turned slowly, and looked at her for a long time.

"And I refuse to leave," he answered. "But I will intrude myself upon you as little as possible."

CHAPTER IX

MR. INSKIP, in his refusal, had reckoned without his wife.

For the next three days he did not see her at all. Her breakfast now was always taken to her in her bedroom; and Inskip dined thrice running at his club. On the fourth evening, however, he returned to his home at eight o'clock, and walked into the dining-room, cool and debonair and handsome. The room was empty.

He studied the "Westminster Gazette" whilst the footman brought in dinner, and it was only as he strolled to the table that he noticed it was simply laid for one.

"Is your mistress dining in her room to-night?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Seraphine says, sir, that the mistress has been very unwell all day."

Hugh ate his dinner with profound wretchedness. Immediately he had finished he went along the passage, and knocked at his wife's door.

Seraphine, trim in her black silk gown, opened it, finger on lip.

"Sh! 'sh! My mistress sleeps."

He pushed her aside.

"You can wait in the boudoir," he said. "I wish to speak to my wife."

The bedroom was in semi-darkness. The long, narrow windows were all flung open, and the soft night wind was quivering and throbbing through the drawn lace curtains. There was a great brass bowl of mimosa on the table by the bed. The exquisite, suggestive perfume floated to Inskip's senses like a caress.

His wife was lying full-length on the sofa. Her hands were clasped behind her head. He could see the beautiful, slender arms as the winged sleeves of her white tea-gown fell away. A wave of feeling swept over him with a wild, inarticulate fierceness. . . .

Then he saw her face, and drew his breath quickly.

The girl looked dying. The great grey eyes were sunk deep into her face; the eyelids were red and swollen, with dark, encircling shadows. The mouth had its most pathetic droop.

"*Iris!*" cried the man, in horror. "Are you ill?"

She turned her unhappy face towards him, but made no reply.

He called Seraphine.

"Telephone to Dr. Gore-Jones immediately," he said, "and ask him to come and see Mrs. Inskip at once."

"My mistress, she 'ave been cryin' all day," said the maid, as she hurried away, "an' she eat nothin'."

Inskip closed the bedroom door gently, and went along the passage to his study. It was lighted dimly by the heavy silver lamp that hung above the divan. He sat down on the low seat, and pressed his fingers over his eyes, as if to shut out some unwelcome, painful picture.

So had *she* sat in that very place two days ago.

The man shuddered involuntarily all through his strongly-knit frame in a wild, pitiless surge of human feeling. His thoughts were chaotic and black. In some curious, unfathomable way they hovered around and about Death. He could not escape from a grim prescience of coming danger. Was it the look on his wife's young face as she lay on her couch? Was it something less definite, yet infinitely more real, that seemed to point inevitably and inexorably to that great and simple solution of all the problems of life? He could not tell; he only knew that, in this very room with him, was a Shadow, and that the Shadow was:

"Closer . . . 'na breathing,
Nearer tha hands or feet."

It was an hour later that Sir Edward Gore-Jones looked into the study on his return journey from Mrs. Inskip's bedroom.

Hugh was pacing up and down the room, and turned with all his questions on his face. The doctor strode towards him with the usual blank and courteous expression of the experienced medical man; but his eyes swept keenly over the long dark visage of his patient's husband.

"Well?" said Inskip, huskily. "Well?"

"I found your wife extremely agitated—almost dangerously so," said the doctor.

The man listening shuddered, and turned hastily away.

For a second Gore-Jones had a difficulty in speaking.

He began a sentence, hesitated, ended abruptly. His second attempt came fluently enough.

"At these times women, all the world over, get *odd*, extraordinary notions."

No answer. Inskip again had the weird sensation of the Shadow coming close. It was ghastly—a cold sweat broke out on his forehead. The doctor noticed it, and had even greater difficulty with his next sentence. But it came.

"Your wife wishes to be alone—for a time."

"Yes," said the man.

"Unless her wish is granted, she will work herself into a fever. She has begun to do so already."

"Yes," came the toneless voice.

"Under the circumstances, Mr. Inskip . . . it's a brutal thing to ask of any husband . . . but I think you'd better go."

Remembering this interview afterwards, the great obstetrician invariably recalled the curious, toneless voice—the voice that had a ring of Fatalism in it.

"Yes," again said Hugh Inskip.

Gore-Jones lit a cigar before he made any further comment. His host stood like a statue in the middle of the room, watching the thin stream of blue smoke curling towards the ceiling.

"Mrs. Inskip wishes you to go for a voyage that will take about three months."

"Yes."

"It looks like New Zealand—eh?"

"Yes."

"She would like you to start as soon as possible."

"Yes."

The doctor put down his cigar, and crossed impulsively to the statue-like figure. He laid his hand on Inskip's shoulder with a touch of genuine sympathy.

"I'm frightfully sorry for you, old man."

Inskip's face never altered. He allowed the hand to remain on his shoulder—and that was all. The doctor, with a tact acquired from a life's-time experience, saw that sympathy was not desired. He took up his hat.

"In three months you'll be back—the happiest of fathers."

"Yes," said the voice once more.

When the hall-door had closed upon the great doctor, Inskip crossed to his telephone, and rang up the office of the South Sea Line. He found he could have a berth in a boat leaving England in three days. With a somewhat bitter smile, and a shrug of the shoulders, he inquired if no boat left Tilbury sooner.

He busied himself till very late arranging and sorting his papers. There were several unfinished magazine articles which were bound to be completed by the following month. He collected the manuscripts. He would work at them during the outward voyage.

On the table, under a large brass paper-weight, was Margaret's play in its familiar brown cover. He took it up, hesitatingly . . . held it in his hands almost as though it were a live thing. Then he wrapped it up in a neat parcel, and addressed it to Mrs. Stair.

Then he wrote a letter. It was a difficult task, apparently, for it was only after many efforts that it was finished.

"My dear Margaret,—I enclose the play, the writing of which has been to me an infinite pleasure, the acting of which I hope will be for you a triumph. I am leaving England on Friday for three months. I think it better on my return that our long friendship should end—for my own sake.—Hugh Dalziel Inskip."

(Mrs. Stair received this remarkable letter the following morning. She read it through three times; kissed it twice; then put it at the bottom of her jewel-case.

Then she took it up a third time and kissed it. "Oh, you chivalrous, foolish, magnificent liar!" she murmured.)

Inskip's two remaining days were filled with the necessary business arrangements entailed by a long voyage. His meals were taken for the most part at restaurants, or at the club; he rose early and retired late; and his wife, very gently and sweetly, refused to see him at all.

"Iris," he had said quietly at her door the first morning, "can I come in?"

But the girl, conscious of red eyes and a ravaged face, merely replied sadly, "No, Hugh, I feel too ill."

His last venture was on the evening of the second day. He came home just before midnight, and listened at his wife's door. She was stirring restlessly in bed: he knew she was awake.

"Iris—may I speak to you for a minute?"

The restless stirring ceased. There was absolute

silence. Through the kinder simulation of sleep was conveyed the refusal.

Inskip turned away instantly, and went to his dressing-room. It was littered with preparations for the departure of to-morrow. His man was packing thin linen suits into a cabin trunk, and raised a sleepy face to his master.

"Go to bed," said Inskip.

He finished packing himself, locked the trunk, and then sat down on a low chair by the fireplace. Again he had the extraordinary sensation of not being alone in the room. It was as if some invisible, monstrous enemy were very close to him, were breathing on him, encircling him with damp, ethereal arms. He poured out a whisky-and-soda and drank it—yet the feeling still remained.

In the next room he heard his wife's cough—
instantly checked, as though she had buried her head under the clothes. It told its own tale. For one moment he turned his face towards her door. On it was that saddest, most hopeless of expressions—that of the wanderer who carries the heart of an exile in the land of his home.

There was a note for him in the morning:

"My darling Hugh,—Only come to me to say good-bye. I can't stand more.—Iris."

And so it was that he did not see his wife until an hour after luncheon, and ten minutes before he was due to leave the house.

She was in her boudoir—a graceful, dove-toned room, with a grey carpet, soft green walls, and grey-green curtains. It was a room in which there were

never any flowers, for its owner objected to her colour-scheme being disturbed; but there were quantities of ferns in pots, and some large, over-spreading palms.

Under one of these sat Iris in a grey chiffon gown, her fair hair gathered loosely into a gold-meshed fillet, a narrow piece of black velvet round her dead-white throat, long pearl earrings in her ears, little dove-grey slippers of suède—a picture to arouse the deepest interest.

Inskip went hastily forward with an almost passionate eagerness. He saw neither the earrings nor the slippers; the graceful, flowing gown nor the artistic disarrangement of fair hair. His eyes were searching his wife's face in a sort of desperation.

"Iris!" he cried, hoarsely, "Iris, do you *know* what you're doing?"

She raised her eyes to his, and met a look so compelling, so arresting, that she could not face it. Her eyes fell.

"Hugh," she said, and the words were scarcely above a whisper, "after what has happened I can only face this—alone."

"Do you know you are depriving me of the tenderest, most sacred experience of a man and a father?"

"Only for a time, Hugh—only for a time."

He took her in his arms tenderly, almost as he might have taken a child, and looked deep down into the innocent grey eyes.

"Iris—for the last time I ask—won't you change your mind?"

There was a long silence in the quiet grey room. Iris felt her heart beating violently against her side.

It seemed to her to be fighting fiercely for its life—for more than its own single life. With all her soul at that moment she longed to throw her arms round her husband's neck, and say "Stay"! With all that was good in her she yearned to have him with her through the coming time of peril. . . .

And yet, even as her heart and soul joined in unison, something greater than either, stronger than both, rose up and drove them back. Her Egoism was like a flood-tide—it swamped all underlying things. It showed her two pictures. One, of a girl who had made a tremendous fuss, created an unheard-of scene—and then given in. The other, of a woman who knew her own mind and adhered to her principles—even when they hurt her. It painted, too, a picture of the Future—that glorious, romantic time! Hugh, returning after all was safely over with the ardent love of a bridegroom renewed—herself with the halo of motherhood waiting to receive his reverent kiss.

"Hugh," she said, gently, "you must stay, if you wish it . . . but I do not think I shall live, if you do."

She saw him whiten, and again all that was good in her arose in passionate revolt. "If he asks me again," she thought, "I will say 'yes.' Oh, Hugh, oh, Hugh, ask me!"

But he stooped and kissed her tenderly. He asked her no more.

"Good-bye, my little wife," he said. "And may God save and protect you both."

He was by the door before her tears allowed her to see. His face was curiously grave; the beautiful line from the ear to the jaw seemed more hollowed

than usual ; his dark eyes were looking at her as she had never seen them look before. She could not understand their expression.

Thus she saw him, standing at the door, waiting—as if for a final appeal. . . . Thus she remembered him.

CHAPTER X

THE "White Bird" set its wings gaily on that lovely August evening three years ago. It was its twenty-seventh flight to the Antipodes.

And it never made the return journey.

Somewhere in the Indian Ocean it stranded on a rock, sprang a leak, filled with appalling swiftness.

There was little panic. The ship's boats one by one put off, crowded with women and children. Morning papers spoke of the rigid and stately etiquette observed, and of the superb heroism of the men-passengers and the crew—dwelt on them with that one touch too much which is so characteristic of twentieth-century journalism.

Hugh Inskip was writing to his wife when the sickening crash rent the great vessel. It was the day his child was to have been born. The strange apathy, the intense and abnormal weariness which had been so plainly on his face when he left London were still there. He wrote slowly, carefully, and read each sentence as he wrote it.

Then the crash came, and he went on deck.

"I have just seen my wife off," a man said to him. "Have you any relatives on board?"

"None," said Inskip, and turned away.

He went to his cabin again, and tore up the letter

which lay on a chair. "That poor girl," he muttered "that poor, poor girl."

He sat down and wrote hurriedly.

"Whatever happens, my own darling, if the Father decide you shall triumph in this great battle or otherwise, I would like to have written this letter. Since I left you ten days ago I have learned that love is not only stronger than Death, it is stronger than Life, that tangible, pulsating, terrible thing. I love you. I always shall love you, not because you are you, but because I am I——"

Then he spilt some ink on the page, and continued with a shaking hand:

"——Half an hour after writing this we had an accident. The boat now is sinking. Good-bye, my darling. This is not the End—it is only a trial trip. Forgive me my sins—they were the sins of a man who by his own folly lived outside the ark.

"I would like to send you one final message. It is this: Our child will have inherited his mother's and his father's natures, and neither makes for happiness. Try to train him, while he is a baby, while he is a tiny boy, to be satisfied to remain *within the ark*. H.D.I."

He ran on deck, addressed his letter, threw it to the sailor who was steering the last boat.

Then he awaited his Friend.

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EPILOGUE

CHAPTER XI

FROM under a carefully-made canopy of oats and barley and wheat Paul Davenant's beautiful old face looked down on his congregation. Around and about the little lectern upon which was placed the manuscript of his sermon were groups of tomatoes, their glowing complexions contrasting admirably with the blackness of the pulpit's carved oak. At the back of his head, gently tickling his neck, a sheaf of hay waved in the breeze from the open window; whilst, to the left and right of him, were large and opulent bunches of grapes, their purple splendour glowing with a sort of sombre sensuality in the mellow sunlight.

It was his harvest-thanksgiving festival, and, though he had made two or three somewhat obscure allusions to the fact in the course of his address, his sermon had not been altogether a success. His mind wandered back perpetually to an occasion two years ago when, surrounded though he were by fruits of the earth, he had delivered a message on the miasma of the mind to a dissatisfied congregation. Even as the recollection crossed his memory, he glanced to that seat under the gallery where his fair-haired daughter had been sitting amongst the school-children. In her place now was a military-looking woman with an unflinching eye. And Iris, he knew, was playing on the rectory lawn with little Paul.

Then he banished his memories, and proceeded with his sermon.

"The crying and perpetual need of the human heart nowadays," the voice with its deep and resonant note continued, "is not, it strikes me, so much for satisfaction, as for the reverse. We do not crave to be lulled to sleep as a mother lulls her wearied child. We crave rather for a greater pain, for a greater suffering, in order that we may know the passiontide of life.

". . . One of the cruellest tasks a priest has nowadays is dealing with that man in the street who turns to his God with the argument of the peevish materialist: 'Let me die for ever and ever. I want no future. I like this world. When it ends, end me, too.' . . .

"What can one say to him? One can only pray that life may crush him, pain him, cut him to the quick, make him loathe the world as he knows it, make him crave, with a dreaming violence, for all those unknown worlds where, at least, there is no cruelty.

"For," continued the beautiful voice, "cruelty, as man deems cruelty, is part and parcel of the scheme of things as they are. Inexorableness is the great moving force of the Universe. And the Children of the World call their God a hard God. But the Children of Light say their God is Love."

Mr. Ponsonby, his profile a shade more austere than of old against the black carved oak of the choir-stalls, wondered to himself whether his curiously absent-minded old rector had any idea of what he was talking

about. Certainly his remarks, when taken in connection with the great festival, were more than ordinarily inept; more certainly still they had no direct application whatsoever to the congregation, which, far from being inspired by this doctrine of the delirium of renunciation, to a man was coughing and shuffling its feet.

When the curate had first come to the village, many years ago now, he had sometimes wondered if his colleague were absolutely and entirely sincere. (For Mr. Ponsonby detected insincerity in a great many people, and his private opinion of the Good Samaritan had always been that the gentleman had been something of a *poseur*.) But five years' acquaintance with his old rector had convinced him that there was nothing of the *poseur* in Paul Davenant. He was simply eccentric.

And what could be worse than that?

But now the old man was returning to his seat by the altar, and the organ, with much profound emotion, was pealing forth the accompaniment to "Come ye thankful people—Come."

Godfrey Hilyard had allowed his mother to be the sole occupant of the family pew that morning, and was spending a peaceful time in his garden, lying in a hammock, smoking, and reading in various Sunday papers the account of Margaret Stair's great triumph in a new play, "Elöise," at the Piccadilly Theatre the previous night.

"Whoever wrote this play—and so far the author remains anonymous," (said one critic), "it is the work

of a genius, and a genius who understands most absolutely the temperament of his star-lady. Never has Mrs. Stair had, in the days of her greatest triumph a part so exactly suited to her as this beautiful, glowing, passionate, and tragically-crippled Russian girl whose life is spent on a sofa. London went mad over her last night. 'All London' will shortly rave over her as Elöise. Only one living dramatist creates these magnificently virile women. Though one does not wish impertinently to draw away the veil of anonymity, might one, as a humble enquirer, ask, 'Why this unusual bashfulness?'

Hilyard lay in his hammock, his eyes closed, the newspaper slipping from his idle fingers. In the distance he could hear the faint sound of chanting from the church a few lanes away; while, from the long white house whose garden adjoined his own, came the thin, insistent prattle of a baby's voice.

It was Inskip's son; a fact which, sorely against his own will, was a stab in the heart of the healthy, athletic-looking man in whose deeply-tanned face were set honest eyes of a particularly vivid blue. He liked little boys in the abstract, and little boys instinctively recognised a comrade in him; but he never saw tiny, black-eyed Paul Inskip without a heart-ache.

Something in the curious twist of the baby's eyebrows, something in the half-plaintive, half-merry smile was so indisputably his mother's. In nothing else so much as in the child is the mystical unity of marriage demonstrated. Little Paul with his dense black hair and eyes was a miniature of his dead father . . . let him smile, let him twist his baby features

with a puzzled pathos over the problems of life, and lo! it was his fair and graceful mother over again.

That Hilyard was the youthful Mr. Inskip's second godfather did little to render the situation easier. Iris had requested it at a time when no one with a heart (and Godfrey's heart was in exactly the right place) could have refused her anything.

"You are my oldest friend," the girl had written to him, "and Hugh liked you more than most men. When my father dies, I should like to think my little Paul had you as his surviving god-parent."

"Oh, *lor!*" poor Godfrey had muttered to himself as he read the little black-edged note. It was so difficult, so extraordinarily difficult to refuse—and yet the situation was about as heartbreaking for him as it could be. He had returned from his two years' big-game shooting cured, so he told himself. Cured? The little demon, Cupid, laughed with the gay heartlessness of the perpetual child.

Mr. Hilyard always remembered the christening of his godson as one of the quaintest performances at which he had been present. The church was packed with interested villagers; the women weeping; the men clearing their throats with that profound sympathy which feels it must do something audible; the children eating peppermints, and gazing at the young widowed mother who stood, a slight black figure, by the font, her eyes tearless—her face an unforgettable tragedy. Godfrey longed to comfort her—but where could he find the way?

Little Paul, a tiny dark morsel in his long lace robes, slept peacefully in his nurse's arms, save when he

stirred and yawned occasionally. Then his mother would turn and look at him, with such a passion of love and sorrow, that the young man standing beside her felt tears rising very near his eyes.

He was thankful to get to the vestry, away from prying curiosity. The baby awoke then, and looked around him with melancholy black eyes that shone weirdly out of his tiny white face. Suddenly Godfrey had an irresistible impulse.

"Let me hold him, nurse."

The woman placed him carefully in the outstretched arms . . . and Godfrey had again that bitter pang. There was some new and extraordinary hunger at his heart. This little warm bundle, the living symbol of the love of man and wife—and he the outsider. Involuntarily he held the child tighter. It crumpled its face into a terrible expression, and burst into a quavering passion of tears.

"*Wind!*" said the nurse, and patted Paul's little back in a professional manner.

But Godfrey knew better.

After that day he had seen neither his godson nor Mrs. Inskip for a year, as he had (so he told his mother) an interest in an emigrant's farm in South Africa, which he, in unison with several other wealthy young landowners, had founded. Mrs. Hilyard, with the keen eyes of motherhood, saw that love, more than philanthropy, was at that time the ruling motive of her son's life.

"But he will get over it," she thought.

However, when he returned three months ago, she saw that he had not.

Iris, in her graceful black gowns, whose sombre hue set off so perfectly the curiously attractive little face, was infinitely more alluring in her widowhood than she had ever been as a girl. Godfrey's mother felt it herself. She attributed it to the sorrowful experiences that had fallen to the lot of Mrs. Inskip.

"She has grown more like other people," she once said to her son.

He turned on her with a look on his face she could not bear to see.

"*She's grown more like herself,*" was all he said.

After that Mrs. Hilyard resigned herself to the inevitable, and the inevitable meant Hugh Inskip's widow as a daughter-in-law. The idea had not much attraction for her, for her shrewd eyes had long ago discovered the vein of artificiality in a girl who would not even eat an apricot unless it were crystallised. She honestly thought her son deserved something better; she would have liked to see him united to one of those delightful maidens who combine with a pretty face a taste for cookery, with a gentle manner a quick intelligence, and with the mastery of servants a submission to the husband. Godfrey was so entirely amiable—and amiable men, as every woman knows, are getting rarer and rarer in this twentieth century of pampered nerves. He had long ago passed the tiresome age of erotic flutations. He had admirable and simple views of marriage, and when his young cousin from Oxford had recently remarked to him with complacent cynicism that, after all, marriage *was* the most *chic* way to the divorce-court,

Godfrey had replied "double d—d rot!" much to his mother's delight.

About his love for Iris he was absolutely and profoundly silent, but it was so much a part of his life that no mother could remain oblivious of it. In the days before Mrs. Inskip's marriage, Godfrey, Sunday after Sunday, had put in an attendance at the warm little church, not from any very devotional frame of mind, alas! but merely that he might watch a girl with what he called an "unawakened" face.

His mother in those days sometimes wondered why he did not propose and have done with it, but it was only years afterwards that she ventured to ask the question.

Godfrey's answer was terse.

"Because I did not want to have done with it."

And now the old love seemed increasing into something that would not long be denied.

Mrs. Hilyard never could quite own to herself that she understood either Iris or her father; they were both so very "odd"; and yet she sometimes thought she saw on the girl's face a touch of something deeper than mere affection when Iris looked at Godfrey. But these moments of comprehension were swiftly followed by others of doubt. Iris, Mrs. Hilyard remembered, had those beautiful, misleading eyes that may mean nothing and look the key to all the philosophies; as a little girl she had gazed dreamily into the face of her large gollywog in much the same manner—but when gollywogs became unfashionable the expression was transferred to Teddy bears.

Coming home from church this Sunday morning

Mrs. Hilyard pondered over the situation. It was the kind of situation which, if prolonged too long, might become romantic—a terrible thing! It was not good for any man, she thought, to have a hopeless love affair, and she had the greatest possible distaste for Dante and other poetic souls whose domestic aspirations were aimed at the unattainable. She had once said something of the sort to Paul Davenant, who had looked at her gravely and then replied:

"Considered aright, a hopeless love affair is the best thing in the world, and almost the most beautiful."

Mrs. Hilyard had turned the conversation hastily to young asparagus at the time, but she recalled the words with irritation this morning as she entered her trim little garden, and saw her son's brown face turn towards her with a smile which did not reach his eyes.

"The boy is miserable," she thought, angrily. "Oh, what fools men are!"

She walked slowly across the lawn. Godfrey slid off his hammock, and came to meet her.

"I see Mrs. Stair had a magnificent triumph last night," he remarked.

"I call it sheer immodesty for a woman to trade on her infirmity," said Mrs. Hilyard.

Godfrey turned on her with some warmth. "Mrs. Stair has turned her infirmity into a glory—isn't that finer than letting it crush her?"

"Somehow I never did like that woman," said Mrs. Hilyard. "It might have been the way she did her hair," she added, as she remembered it was Sunday, a day on which one ought to be charitable—if insincere.

Mr. Hilyard made no reply. As much as it was possible for a man to dislike a very beautiful and fascinating woman he had disliked Mrs. Stair himself, which was probably the reason he was always scrupulously fair to her—for there is nothing in all poor Human Nature so ludicrously unfair as love; nothing so calmly judicial as a faint dislike.

"And her conduct to Iris was heartless under the circumstances."

Godfrey turned quickly at the words. His mother knew he would.

"Eh?" he said.

"Iris asked her to be little Paul's godmother. Mrs. Stair absolutely refused."

"Actresses can't be bothered with god-children," Godfrey muttered.

"But she must have refused very unkindly. I was at the rectory when Iris read the letter. It was very long; and I could see by her face that the refusal was not put nicely."

"*Damn* the woman!" said Godfrey, hotly.

Mrs. Hilyard was silent. It was all very, very pitiful she thought. She moved nearer her son. Her hard face was very gentle, and there was a light in her eyes which never shone for anyone save him.

"Godfrey," she said, softly, "Godfrey."

"Yes, mum?"

The old nursery name came very seldom now, and the mother's heart responded to it instantly.

"I don't want to be inquisitive, my boy, or to pry, or to be tactless. But—but why don't you *ask* Iris?"

He looked at her. Then he laughed. There was no merriment in the laughter.

"*Nobody* could help loving you!" his mother cried.

He laughed again.

"Am I so perfectly irresistible?" he enquired.

His mother took one of the big brown hands in hers and looked at it.

"Godfrey, I can't bear to see you unhappy."

He frowned suddenly.

"Do I carry my heart on my sleeve, then, like that?"

"Only for your mother to see. Godfrey, *why* don't you tell Iris you love her?"

He swung into his hammock again, and rocked backwards and forwards with a sort of lazy vehemence. Then he looked down at his mother.

"Because I mean to go to South Africa next week, and set my teeth in a vice and *bear* it. . . . And because *she* adored, adores, and always will adore that man whose body worms now are eating at the bottom of the Indian Ocean," he replied.

Meanwhile, Paul Davenant had returned to his rectory, and had walked through the open library window on to the velvety, daisy-strewn lawn, where, under the great walnut-tree, was a table spread with luncheon, and his daughter Iris gravely stirring salmon into a big salad-bowl.

The old man drew up his chair with a sigh of content.

"Isn't Ponsonby coming?" he asked.

"Mr. Ponsonby, having heard a rumour that the son and heir of the Smith family intends to be married in chapel, has ridden off in hot haste on his bicycle

to investigate. He said he expected to settle the matter in no time, and would be back before the school opens."

"The poor man will get no lunch."

"Can you imagine him eating salad while Rome is burning like this?"

Mr. Davenant finished his simple luncheon in dreamy content. The old garden, the whirring of the bees over his head, the cawing of the rooks, the perfume of the elders, the massed mosaic of vehemently-coloured autumn flowers in the beds at the side of the lawn—and his daughter near him: it was the same picture as of old—and yet how different! The girl opposite him, in her long black gown, the wind ruffling her soft fair hair, was as graceful and charming as before; but, looking at her, it seemed to the old man as if the Iris of bygone years had been a mere painted shadow in that dim drama he had miscalled Life, and as if poignant reality were marked indelibly on the fair face which had now that most beautiful of all looks—that of the wanderer who has found his home.

She had rarely, if ever, spoken to her father of that tragic death in the far-off sea. After the first burst of passionate grief she had gathered her faculties together and set her back to the wall—for the sake of the child. But the old man, dreamer, student, scholar, though he was, understood with an almost vital understanding that, for Iris, Hugh Inskip would never die; his influence over all her life was of that poignant, far-reaching nature which was a triumph of the unseen, unphysical, spiritualised, on a character

always attuned to mysticism, as a sunflower to its sun.

Once, when the baby had had on its wee face the exact expression of the dead man, Iris had turned to her father passionately:

"Look at him! Look at him! Hugh has that very same smile."

The old man held her hand tightly, but did not speak. Iris kissed the child, and went up to her own little bedroom to read again the letter the sailor had brought her.

"*He loves me! He loves me! He loves me!*" Oh! bitterest yet sweetest irony. For the letter, written bravely by a brave man on the point of death, with its passionate unreality and its real passion, had a far-reaching influence that could never have been foreseen by the writer.

Paul Davenant finished his frugal luncheon of salad and grapes, and then leaned back in a low deck-chair and lit his pipe.

Iris sat on the grass beside him, looking through a sheaf of papers.

"This is the architect's sketch I like best," she said, and handed a parchment roll to her father.

The old man studied it with interest, puffing at his pipe.

"I like the gymnasium plan," he said, "it is precisely what is needed for undersized city children, and it is what those country cottages never provide."

Iris turned to him enthusiastically.

"How I love talking to someone who understands!

Mrs. Hilyard told me I was mad—at least, she said I 'was not myself.'"

"That is a state," said her father, "into which one is imagined to fall when one is most oneself. Did she elucidate?"

"Yes—in this way. She said these London children were always boarded-out in small cottages with labourers' wives, or at farms, and for me to build a house on the moor with a garden and a gymnasium and a staff of nurses was sheer idiocy!"

The old man smiled whimsically.

"There are two things the British Public prides itself on knowing how to deal with—its sheer idiots, and its geniuses. It treats them both alike. Build your house, Iris. Build your gymnasium. *Be* an idiot."

"Perhaps I shall be like that lady who aimed at instituting a *salon*, and only achieved a restaurant."

"Never mind that, if you feed the hungry at your restaurant."

"Father, I've never spoken to you of this before—but, when Hugh died, my remorse was so *terrible* I felt I might go mad. Then my love for him conquered even my sorrow. I wanted to be something that he would like—to get away from my petty little soul. I wanted more even than to be a mother to our darling baby: I wanted to be a mother to many."

"There are two kinds of repentance," mused the old man. "On one all the cynicism of the world has been founded, and on the other the rock on which Christ built His Church. There is the repentance of disillusionment—and the repentance of *love*. Judas

was a penitent; so also was Peter. The penitence of one made him a suicide: but of the other it made a Saint."

Iris turned to him with a passionate question:

"You know what made shipwreck of my life with Hugh?"

"Tell me," said Paul Davenant, "tell me yourself."

"He found out how utterly unreal I was."

The old man touched her hair with a hand that trembled slightly.

"What he did not know," he said, "was the large share heredity plays in these matters. Some natures have a talent for misleading others: nearly all youth has the instinct for dissimulation. . . ." He was rising from his chair as he spoke. . . "Remember that Hugh sees that beautiful thing—the *other's side* now."

Then his voice altered.

"There is Ponsonby. It must be school-time."

The curate, very highly-coloured from his long ride, stood at the gate and awaited his rector.

"I grieve to tell you," he said, "that the rumour I heard was correct. The Smiths, one and all, have succumbed to the charm of lantern-lectures at the Nonconformist chapel."

"Perhaps," said the old man, "they will return to their Mother Church again."

"Not they."

"I have known such cases."

Mr. Ponsonby did not wish to argue with fallacies. He preferred laying down aphorisms.

"Character never alters—it only develops," he said.

The old man made no reply. He was looking at Iris in the distance. Her son had just run to her from his nurse's arms. She had caught him in her own, and was holding him, looking down on him in the sunshine.

Paul Davenant watched the two.

It was nearly an hour later that Godfrey Hilyard strolled over to the rectory by the old familiar path through the beech plantation separating the two houses.

As he drew near he heard voices; one the lazy prattle of a child, the other a woman's voice singing—sweet and low. A rise in the ground revealed a picture to him that he never forgot.

The sun was dazzling in its intensity, but under the thick trees fringing the rectory lawn was only a cool golden-greenness. Little Paul was playing with a toy elephant, a large and amiable animal with a beatific smile. Iris was tying dahlias to a stick, her fair head bent. She was singing softly to herself the harem-song from *Kismet*. At first the lovely words passed Hilyard's ears unheeded.

Then he listened:

"O Lute within my lap, o'er thee I bend
My sobbing child of Love, thy cry to tend
. . . Yet still as I do give,
Thy yearning groweth ever without end. Ah!

"O sweetest loss! O milk of melody!
What though my heart go forth in yielding thee!
Thus would I die a thousand deaths than live
Frozen and barren, to eternity. Ah!"

There was a sudden scream. Little Paul had fallen and bumped his black head against a garden-seat. Iris, with a scared expression, ran to him, arms outstretched. But, before she could reach him, the child had scrambled to his feet, his little face puckered into a brave semblance of unconcern, his small mouth smiling with a somewhat pitiful insouciance. At that moment he looked the image of his dead father.

Hilyard saw it: it was for him the keynote to what followed.

The young mother caught the child in her arms, and held him passionately. "Hugh! Oh, Hugh!" Godfrey heard her cry.

Then little Paul shook himself free, and Iris turned round to see a tall, bronzed man with a pleasant smile, who said he had come for tea, and to say "good-bye."

THE END

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